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# BODIES OF WORK

B.S. Johnson's pages, Alasdair Gray's  
paragraphs, and interventions into the  
anatomy of the book

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# Abstract

This thesis is made up of five parts: a critical dissertation, a video essay, a novel and two short stories. The first part, the dissertation, is on what it terms *body texts*: literature that makes deliberate, creative use of its form. This is literature that can't be considered as simply (to use Genette's definition of a literary work), 'a more or less long sequence of verbal statements, more or less endowed with significance,' [*Paratexts*, p1] but is inseparable from its incorporate existence, whether that existence is physical or digital.

Using the work of B.S. Johnson and Alasdair Gray – as authors who have creatively occupied typesetting and production to create fiction that extends beyond the purely verbal – the dissertation considers the antagonistic responses that can often attend to formal devices (such as Johnson's) and how small departures from convention, for example the formatting of paragraphs (in the work of Gray), can have a meaningful aesthetic impact on the work. It considers the difficulties that can accompany attempts by the author to occupy the paratext of their work; how the rise of digital reading environments both encourage formal experimentation, by introducing new capacities to the work, and discourage it, by creating a marketplace in which a work is expected to be disembodied and transposable; and it argues for the pleasures of the body text. It also positions these concerns in the context of my own creative work, including in some of the fiction included in the thesis.

There is then a video essay, *B.S. Johnson vs. Death*, made using footage from Johnson's film work. Following this is the novel, *Muscle*, and the two short stories: 'Shark' and 'The Brain Drawing the Bullet', a digital short story created to be read in a web browser.

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### *Author's declaration*

I declare that, except where explicit reference is made to the contribution of others, this thesis is the result of my own work and has not been submitted for any other degree at the University of Glasgow or any other institution.

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# BODIES OF WORK

# AN AREA ON WHICH I MAY PLACE ANY SIGNS

B.S. JOHNSON WAS BORN IN 1933. I can't help but think of him in the first few years of his life (a chubby, swaddled pink globe) being already more himself, more perfectly B.S. Johnson than he could ever be again. Before he read Beckett and Joyce; before he decided that the conventional novel was moribund and that to tell a story was to lie; before he wrote his own seven novels, his poetry, his journalism (arts, and also sports journalism) or any of the countless chastisements (private and public) to agents, publishers, unions or anyone else who failed to live up to his standards in their dealings with him; before he ever stood behind or in front of a television camera, or first lamented the failure of an outwardly unexceptional love affair as if it were a breaking wheel to which he had been lashed; before his first depressive thought of suicide; before any of the things we might typically think of as *defining*, as being particularly *him*, a baby-B.S. Johnson seems like the ideal B.S. Johnson because he was always infantile. His appetite stayed childish, immoderate and unrefined, and kept him boyishly plumped (earnestly, in the profoundly earnest *The Unfortunates*, he writes, 'Deep in my heart I know that I love chips' [*'Here comes', p1*]). The personal attacks that his letters are full of are petulant and spiteful.<sup>1</sup> And in his solipsism, and in the absoluteness of his own convictions – the way they encircled themselves in their own logic until no one could criticise a novel but that novel's author, or rather (only this more specific formulation seemed to hold), no one could criticize a B.S. Johnson novel without being B.S. Johnson – and in his need for love that was just as absolute, that was uncomplicated and devotional: in these ways also

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<sup>1</sup> In a letter to an American publisher who had declined one of his books he wrote, not untypically, 'TRAVELLING PEOPLE, my first novel, won a Gregory Award: the judges for which were Herbert Read, Henry Moore, Bonamy Dobrée and TS Eliot: what did you say your name was, mate?' The letter's opening line, to a man he'd never met, or even directly corresponded with, is, 'You ignorant unliterary Americans make me puke.' [*Coe, p191*]



he was childish until the end, the sad, early end (one of the ways he never grew up was in this unhappy, literal sense: that he killed himself at the age of forty).

Of this complicated, volatile man and prolific artist (particularly prolific considering the unnatural shortness of his career) what has survived? What do we talk about when we talk about B.S. Johnson? His novels, principally. More particularly, what happens with the best remembered of his novels is that the most visible and transgressive assault on the conventional form of the book becomes a synecdoche for the book itself. So *The Unfortunates* is known not for being a novel about memory and the loss of a friend to cancer but for the physical fact of its twenty-seven boxed, loose, shuffle-able sections. *Albert Angelo* is known for the holes cut in two of its leaves, so that from page 149 the reader can see through (is made to see through) to a section of a paragraph on page 153. By the same process of the part standing for the whole, this process of reduction, B.S. Johnson is just this: the man who put one book in a box, and cut holes in another.<sup>2</sup>

In May 1964, Johnson wrote several pages of notes for reviewers. *Albert Angelo* was about to come out (it was his second novel) and the notes were to accompany advance copies of the book being sent out by his publishers.

In *Albert Angelo*, Albert is an ‘architect manqué’ (as he’s dismissively called by a deputy headmaster [p29]), devising buildings that will never be made while begrudgingly earning a living as a supply teacher in East London. Albert’s other preoccupation, besides his art, is with a woman who has abandoned him, and he spends his time in cafes with his friend Terry, the two eating and drinking and lamenting together (‘Mostly we talk about women: and mostly about this cow Janine who’s done Terry down, as Jenny did me down’ [p52]). There is also an undertow of tension in the book: a suggestion that Albert’s class played a part in the death of their previous teacher and that Albert is now in line for similar mistreatment at their hands. (Albert seems more oblivious to these intimations, or at least less convinced of their seriousness, than we, the readers, are.)

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<sup>2</sup> So for example there is a *Times* review (which we’ll come back to) of *Like a Fiery Elephant*, Jonathan Coe’s excellent, comprehensive biography of Johnson, titled ‘Writer in a Hole.’ [Coren] Or there’s this judgement of Johnson from a 2013 *Telegraph* article: ‘he’s likely to be known, if at all, as the man who cut holes in the pages of his novel *Albert Angelo* to give the reader a glimpse of a forthcoming chapter, or as the writer of *The Unfortunates*, a box of unbound signatures.’ [Martin]

Finally, though, it's not just the pupils that get Albert. They do – in a two-page coda to the novel they find Albert walking beside a canal, and throw him in, killing him – but before that Albert is crushed in a collapse of the fiction itself. He sits, uninspired, at a drawing board and in the middle of a paragraph, when a voice erupts into the text '—— OH, FUCK ALL THIS LYING!' [p163]

After this 'almighty aposiopesis' [p164] begins a section called 'Disintegration' in which the new narrative voice angrily, energetically attempts to expel all pretence ('Jenny' becomes 'Muriel', the name of the woman who left Johnson, and Albert's architecture is revealed to be a stand-in for poetry): as Johnson would later put it, it breaks through the 'disease of the objective correlative to speak truth directly if solipsistically.' [AYRYTBWYM?, p22]

This is the novel Johnson attempted to explain to reviewers. This is some of what he wrote:

Various unconventional devices are used in ALBERT ANGELO for effects which I felt I could not satisfactorily achieve by any other means. Thus a specially-designed typecharacter draws attention to physical descriptions which I believe tend to be skipped, do not usually penetrate sufficiently; to convey what a particular lesson is like the thoughts of a teacher are given on the right-hand side of a page in italic, with his and his pupils' speech on the left in roman, so that, though the reader obviously cannot read both at once, when he has read both he will have *seen* that they are simultaneous and *enacted for himself* that they are simultaneous; when Albert finds a fortuneteller's card in the street, it is further from the truth to describe it than simply to reproduce it; and when a future event must be revealed, I can think of no way nearer the truth than to cut a section through those pages intervening so that that event may be read in its place but before the reader reaches that place.

To quote from ALBERT ANGELO:

– A page is an area on which I may place any signs I consider to communicate most nearly what I have to convey: therefore I employ, within the pocket of my publisher and the patience of my printer, typographical tech-

niques beyond the arbitrary and constricting limits of the conventional novel. To dismiss such techniques as gimmicks, or to refuse to take them seriously, is crassly to miss the point.

I am not saying that all novels should be written like ALBERT ANGELO, or that all those which use conventional techniques are bad: but rather that I find the conventional novel unsuitable for what I have to say and have therefore to solve my problems unconventionally. [Coe, p157]

One obvious thing that can be said about this quote is that it is not a 'future event' that is revealed by the holes in the pages of *Albert Angelo*. The cut reveals a knife, a knife that inflicts a mortal wound, penetrating beneath a right eye to a depth of two inches and killing. But it is the knife that killed Christopher Marlowe, and his right eye. Not a future event, then, but one nearly 400 years in the past. It is only a 'future event' in the sense that it is placed four pages further into the book than the page through which we catch our first glimpse of it.

In the *London Review of Books* Frank Kermode observes: 'The reference to that historical moment is what Genette would call a "heterodiegetic analepsis", and, horrible as that sounds, the effect it specifies can be achieved without cutting holes in the pages. There was no need of the famous hole.'

(In Gerard Genette's terminology a heterodiegetic analepsis would be a narrative event in which the narrator is absent from that which is being narrated – so 'heterodiegetic' [e.g. Genette, *Narrative Discourse*, p244–5] – and which took place prior to our current position in the story that contains it – 'analepsis'. [e.g. *Ibid.*, p40])

*Albert Angelo* is a stylistically fluid book. Some of this fluidity is obvious from the above quotation – the section given in dual columns, as well as the visual reproduction of the fortuneteller's card – but there are other ways in which its lack of inhibitions are obvious: it is sometimes in the first person, sometimes in the third, and for a while even in the second (Albert being the 'you' to whom it is addressed); two sections are given in script-form dialogue; it includes exercises apparently written by Albert's pupils;<sup>3</sup> and of

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3 In fact, reproductions of exercises written by Johnson's own students.

course there is the direct appeal to the reader in the 'Disintegration.' There's no other instance of heterodiegetic analepsis in the book, but then there is only one instance of a piece of printed material being directly reproduced on the page – the fortuneteller's card – and it does not seem at all out of character that it should appear. As each book teaches us how it should be read, so we would find ourselves well-prepared for the appearance in *Albert Angelo* of an account of the final day of a 16th century poet and dramatist, especially considering our concerns that Albert might be headed for a violent end.<sup>4</sup> Marlowe's early death by stabbing follows an evening out that begins with Albert describing to Terry the children's propensity for aggression, continues with a general threat of worsening violence that is never quite realized, and ends with a policeman warning Albert and Terry to move on 'as this was Stepney and any minute a drunken man might rush out of a house with a knife in his hand and stick it into the first person he saw.' [p153] Its appearance would hardly surprise us then, if it wasn't delivered in such an unconventional manner.

Is Kermode right, therefore, to say that there is 'no need' for the hole? Surely the Marlowe paragraph could have appeared as easily at the place in the narrative where we first glimpse it, through the hole, on page 149, as in its fixed, contextualized position on page 153, and if Johnson had wanted a reference to it to appear in both places, he could have done that as well, still no cutting required.

What the hole creates though is something like an illusion of forced perspective. We are given three lines out of context, which we believe definitively to show that we are only a few pages from witnessing *Albert's* death. The section visible through the holes ends 'he died instantly.' [p153]<sup>5</sup> Then the next line, which we *cannot* see through the hole, names Marlowe as the 'he.' No oblique initial reference to knives or stabbing could achieve quite the same effect and mislead us in quite the same way.

If Kermode is dismissive of the need for the hole there's one possible explanation why. He was reviewing the *B.S. Johnson Omnibus*, brought out in 2004 by Picador and including three novels: *Trawl*, *Albert Angelo* and *House Mother Normal*. The copies of the

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<sup>4</sup> Johnson imagined a very direct link between himself (his model for Albert) and Marlowe. Coe writes: 'His identification with Christopher Marlowe grew so strong that he became convinced he was going to die, like the playwright, at the age of twenty-nine.' [p56]

<sup>5</sup> Though even page references are made complicated by this discussion...

omnibus I have seen all misplace the cut, so that the section of the paragraph that is revealed is a line lower, and includes the revelation that it is Marlowe whose death we witness. There is no surprise, no trick, no point. There is 'no need for the famous hole' because of a production error.

Another obvious thing that can be said about the quote above from Johnson's notes to *Albert Angelo* reviewers, is that it's actually two quotes. In his combative defence of the 'devices' of the novel, Johnson quotes from the novel's own combative defence of itself. His strident lecture to prospective critics is a double lecture.

We might be inclined to agree with Johnson (and think he shows a degree more self-awareness) when, some years later, towards the very end of his life, he writes, 'I do not propose to go through the reasons for all the devices, not least because the novels should speak for themselves.' [AYRYTBWYM?, p20]<sup>6</sup> Except he immediately goes on to quote at length from the 'explanatory prelude' to *Travelling People*. From the prelude that opens his first novel to one of the last things he wrote, Johnson is reliable, immovable in his need to explain and justify.

And whether this need and the resultant condescending, hectoring tone of these double lectures was born of a profound insecurity (as it seems reasonable to believe, as Coe and others seem convinced<sup>7</sup>) and might provoke a kind of condescending pity for the blustery, bellicose B.S. Johnson ('wracked with self-certainties', as Gordon Williams called him [quoted in Coe, p36]), it's nevertheless an unappealing attitude. Johnson wants to wring the neck of the reader's reaction to his work, to steal from us the right to an opinion. His sense of self worth was so delicate that he wanted to protect himself not just from the vagaries of interpretation but also from criticism in this sense: that no one should ever aspire to an opinion of how good his writing was, or how successful.

So, seventy-six words attached to the beginning of *Statement Against Corpses* (the short story collection Johnson co-wrote with Zulfikar Ghose) neatly, mercilessly

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6 Certainly the *Glasgow Herald* reviewer of *Albert Angelo* (presumably one of the recipients of Johnson's guidance in how to read the book) would agree: 'If an author has to explain himself, I think he has to that extent failed.' [Quoted in Coe, p158]

7 'Self-doubt, and vulnerability: these were the things, I've come to realize, that made B.S. Johnson the artist he was.' [Coe, p452]

frame the stories not as art to be engaged with, to feel delighted or exposed by, but as 'demonstrations of the form's wide technical range': the implication seems to be that they are to be accepted and studied, rather than read.<sup>8</sup>

So, after *Albert Angelo* was published, Johnson wrote (in another defence of it, this one in a letter to his friend Anthony Smith<sup>9</sup>), 'And, again, the more I think the more I become convinced of the utter uselessness of lit crit, and begin to think like: "AA just is, and it's that way because it is that way, and it's no other way because I rejected all the alternatives as being worse, and no one, but no one, can think themselves into the position of the writer and consider those alternatives."' [Coe, p169]

The reader's access to a text is cursory, immaterial; the writer's (again, more accurate to say B.S. Johnson's, happy as he was to criticise other writers and their work) access to his own text (and to himself), impossibly perfect, and yet somehow permitting no elucidation, no demonstration by example of why all alternatives had to be rejected. It 'just is'.

This is the discourse of authority, with the author as the God of His work, whose ways may be mysterious, but they cannot be challenged – they simply exist beyond our comprehension.<sup>10</sup>

Though, in the event that his own absolute authority was not accepted, Johnson was happy to support it with any other authority available to him. In the 'what did you say your name was, mate?' letter,<sup>11</sup> Johnson wants to shut down criticism by an appeal to the artistic and literary credentials of Read, Eliot, Moore and Dobrée. His

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8 Co-signed by Johnson and Ghose, they are:

These short stories have been written in the knowledge that the form is in decline, but in the belief that this is due to no fault inherent in the form.

The short story deserves, but seldom receives, the same precise attention to language as that given normally only to a poem.

This book represents a joint attempt, through demonstration of the form's wide technical range, to draw attention to a literary form which is undeservedly neglected.

[*Statement Against Corpses*, page vii]

9 Who also thought that he was 'at root [...] a very insecure man.' [Quoted in Coe, p395]

10 The discourse that Barthes argued against: 'We know now that a text is not a line of words releasing a single "theological" meaning (the "message" of the Author-God) but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and crash.' [*The Death of the Author*, p146]

11 See footnote 2, above.

sometimes awkward insistence that truth was of absolute importance in his writing was presumably sincere, but it also, handily, supplied him another authority – an objective, reliable armour within which his writing (and fragile ego) could be secured: if his novels seemed to him sufficiently truthful, then he could dismiss any criticism of them.

This extended to the use of his devices, as they were intended to serve a mimetic function, as we can see in the notes to Albert Angelo reviewers – even (obscurely) the holes in the pages: ‘I can think of no way *nearer the truth* than to cut a section through those pages intervening.’<sup>12</sup> What ‘truth’ does this claim possibly refer to? It could be argued, perhaps, that by misleading the reader into the belief that Albert is pages away from a violent death, we are being compelled into a more ‘truthful’ understanding of Albert, closer to his experience of his own existence, except that Albert never seems at all as concerned for his safety as the reader is given cause to be.<sup>13</sup> Both language and logic strain, still we (truthfully) can’t quite meet Johnson’s position.

His aspiration is that his books should be unimpeachable and the reader should be their passive recipient. ‘I want my ideas to be expressed so precisely that the very minimum of room for interpretation is left [...] If [the reader] wants to impose his imagination, let him write his own books.’ [*AYRYTBWYM?*, p28]

Don’t question me, Don’t engage, This is not your book but mine. In the face of these demands, confronted by an author who wants to insert himself whole into the reader’s head, with little obvious interest in the comfort of the head, isn’t it reasonable to expect – to enjoy, maybe – some defensive manoeuvres on behalf of the rights of the reader, maybe even a counter-attack against B.S. Johnson? If Johnson’s insecure, over-aggressive protection of his work makes us dislike him, why should we be shy in

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<sup>12</sup> Emphasis mine.

<sup>13</sup> Whatever Johnson’s convictions about the inevitability of his own early death, his fictional stand-in is more blasé. For example, the lesson that is given in two columns – speech on the left, Albert’s thoughts on the right – includes the children repeatedly saying to each other of Albert that he’ll ‘ave t’ go’ [p68, p70, p77, p96]. None of these threats pass across the gutter between columns and penetrate Albert’s inner concerns. (Once he asks what has been said and it is played off – ‘I’ll ‘ave t’go to the toilet.’ [p77])

He is not completely blind to the children’s capacity for violence, but the furthest he’ll credit it seems to be when one of them tells him (their previous teacher has died, gassed, an apparent suicide), ‘We’ve decided, and we’re all chipping in for a gasring for you,’ and he tells Terry, ‘They’re half-serious too, that’s what’s so interesting, half-serious.’ [p128]

wanting to see his arrogance punished? After all, a literature that is beyond criticism, that does not permit interpretation, that 'just is', is a literature denatured. Don't we take the side of art when we turn on the power-mad author?

So, do we enjoy the mistake Picador made, in carving into *Albert Angelo* in slightly the wrong place? Do we enjoy all the other misfortunes that the book seems to have suffered for the sake of the holes: the 'many booksellers' who, according to Coe, 'sent the novel back, thinking they had been supplied with damaged copies' [p168]; the seizure of the book (so Johnson claimed) by Australian Customs, who 'would not release it until they had been shown the obscenities which (they were convinced) had been excised.' [AYRYTBWYM?, p28] In 2004, Giles Coren reported:

The publication of *Albert Angelo*, the novel with the holes in, was delayed because of difficulties with the cutting [...] So how delightful that when I phoned Picador to ask why they hadn't sent me the long-promised omnibus of his work [...] I was told: 'It's delayed because the printers are having trouble with the holes in *Albert Angelo*.'

Do we delight with him? (And how tickled he would be if he knew that after the delay the hole would still be misplaced!)

Coren seems to be the critic Johnson deserves, after all:

Don't go pretending you've read B.S. Johnson. It won't wash. Because nobody has [...] One novel, the only one that you may have heard of, *The Unfortunates* [...] You probably read only the review in *The Times*. And that was written by me. And I didn't bother to read the book either.

This is B.S. Johnson's wish not to be criticised come true. But the result is not thorough-going approval, which he was always happy to receive (*Albert Angelo*, despite the notes to reviewers, had its supporters – at the *Sunday Times*, which called him 'one of the best writers we've got', and the *Irish Times*, which called the book a masterpiece – and he referred to this acclaim on plenty of occasions, including once in a letter to the Chief



Obstetrician of St Bart's<sup>14</sup>). Instead, he is summarily expelled, out on his ear along with his (unread) book.

B.S. Johnson and Giles Coren are alike in how unlikeable they are; they are alike in their opposition to the reader, whose opinion Johnson doesn't value, who Coren doesn't believe exists; they run in two parallel lines of contempt. The easiest thing to do, perhaps, would be to leave them there, in their proximate isolation, to step away and never think about either of them ever again.

I'd pushed things back, written some more here, as if Coren's position was the same as Johnson's and Johnson's the same as Coren's, as if they were both being equally unreasonable (perhaps, depending on how you look at it, maybe) and it's held me back for most of a week now because of how awkward a pose it is for me to take. Evidently, they're not: it shouldn't and doesn't need saying, I would hope (and fuck all this lying, I suppose). Giles Coren wins the unlikeable prick contest. In fact, it's not even a contest.

Johnson exercises no authority over the reader. However much he might want his readers to take his books in a particular way, he can never make us, and the pained earnestness of his demands are just an aspect of his character and of how consumed he was with literature, with his ideas for it. He complained 'there are not many who are writing as though it mattered, as though they meant it, as though they meant it to matter.' [AYRYTBWYM?, p29] It's not a criticism you could level against him. It may have made him bullish and belligerent, but it also invigorates his writing, including his writing about writing (the opinionated bluster of the introduction to *Aren't You Rather Young to be Writing Your Memoirs?* being its greatest example), and it was clearly the only way he could be. All novels implicitly invoke what the novelist thinks a novel ought to and can be, and it is not a failure or indecent for an artist to seek to justify their own aesthetic goals. It's only a reader that can deny themselves a reaction to a piece of art, and if they do it in the most self-satisfied way possible then you have Giles Coren, whose review is a petty dereliction of duty as a critic and a shutting down of openness to experience and to art. As Nicholas Lezard says of the review, 'it typifies the kind of smirking philistinism

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<sup>14</sup> See Coe, p196. He wrote the letter asking to be present at the birth of his son. The obstetrician was apparently unswayed by Johnson's literary acclaim.

that makes this country far more of a cultural desert than it needs to be.

If there is any reason to dwell on Coren it is only to examine this particular type of smirking philistinism, which is not just his, and which is drawn to B.S. Johnson and his devices, his gimmicks, and to other writers who are creatively engaged in exploring the technology of the book.

‘When we concentrate on a material object,’ says Nabokov’s narrator in *Transparent Things*, ‘whatever its situation, the very act of attention may lead to our involuntary sinking into the history of the object.’ [p1]

B.S. Johnson, on the other hand, wrote to harden the memories into which he felt himself painfully sunk. He suffered with his thoughts and wanted to solidify them by the work of the creative act and raise himself free: ‘And I write especially to exorcise, to remove from myself, from my mind, the burden having to bear some pain, [sic] the hurt of some experience: in order that it may be over there, in a book and not in here in my mind.’ [AYRYTBWYM?, p18–19] Writing is, to him, a process of excretion.<sup>15</sup>

As a coping mechanism we might question this process – Johnson himself, reviewing a book of poetry by Sylvia Plath published after her suicide, wrote: ‘I must yet question the value of these poems [...] after all, they did not save her, did they?’ [Coe, p186] But the effort is the engine of his work, and makes his novels painfully felt, personal. He worked the stuff of his life – his convictions, as well as his insecurities – into his art, including his funny, inventive, and sometimes profoundly moving novels.

B.S. Johnson laboured unhappily in an attempt to contain his unhappiness to his books; he laboured at the impossible goal of conveying an absolute truth to his readers that might brook no interpretation; he wrote, ‘what use are images anyway? For one thing simply is not another’ [Trawl, p27] though he might as well have said ‘what use are words? They are not the thing itself.’ Even his attempt to overcome the ‘disease of the objective correlative’ that sickened him (his ‘almighty aposiopesis,’ the ‘Disintegration’ of *Albert Angelo*), as Nicolas Tredell writes, ‘seems blind to some of the difficulties of its attempt to ground truth in the authorial autobiographical self.’ It introduces another

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<sup>15</sup> Asked in Burns’ and Sugnet’s *The Imagination on Trial*, ‘You write like Malone writes? It’s a kind of excreting and there’s no point in explaining it, it just happens?’ he responds: ‘That’s the exact image. I just know it’s something I have to get rid of.’ [p89]

layer to the fiction but can never hope to escape it: he remains diseased. His House Mother laughs: 'ho ho ho! he he he! ha ha ha! heh! heh! heh! and similar printers' straitjackets for the gusty, exploding liberation of laughter.' [*House Mother Normal*, p193–4] B.S. Johnson struggled in those straitjackets, but we see the strain produce remarkable things.

*House Mother Normal* is full of the dread horror of ageing, death and decay. It is organised by another of Johnson's formal devices: a single evening in a Home for the elderly (NERs – 'they have no effective relatives' [p5]) is told and retold through the thoughts and speech of each of the eight inhabitants in turn, and finally, through those of the House Mother in whose care they reside (and by whose abuses they suffer). A brief chart opens each chapter to inform us of such things as our new narrator's age, mobility, pathologies, and ability to answer a set of simple diagnostic questions ('Where are you now? What is this place?'... [p6]). The inmates appear in order of decline, so we begin with the relatively active and cogent, and as the chapters progress the infirmities pile up in number and severity<sup>16</sup> until the last, Rosetta Stanton, can answer none of the questions, can barely move and suffers from 'everything everyone else has' [p161] and more. Each chapter is the same length as each of the other chapters and chronology is carefully mapped to the page, so that each page and position on that page matches the moment on the corresponding page and position in every other account.

So, as an example: in the chapter belonging to the 74-year-old widow Sarah Lamson, at the bottom of her second page, Sarah thinks, 'Now what's she done wrong [...] Mrs Ridge in trouble again.' Eighty-eight pages later, at the bottom of Gloria Ridge's page 2, we find that what Mrs Ridge (85, sufferer from contractures, dementia, osteoporosis...) has done wrong is asking for more meat, and eighty-eight pages after that, at the bottom of the House Mother's page 2, we get the response from the House Mother that first attracts Sarah's attention – 'No! You can't have any more meat you gutsy greedy old slobbery cow!'

(There resides in attempting to explain the novel's form – and, presumably, in crafting something so densely interrelated – a great difficulty that is absent from the

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<sup>16</sup> Enacting by procession the decline we'll all individually face; as the House Mother, speaking directly to the reader at the book's end, reminds us: 'worse times are a-coming, nothing is more sure.' [p204]

actual reading of it, in which the structure makes an intuitive, unchallenging sense that doesn't depend on any explanation, even, really, the House Mother's minimal introduction – 'You shall follow our Social Evening / through nine different minds!' [p5])

By looping through the evening again and again, the partial, fragmentary descriptions given by these inner monologues (and the partial dialogue – each narrator only reports the speech for which they are themselves responsible) create in the reader a cumulative understanding of the events of the novel, even as the individual narratives become ever less lucid (until the grotesque, cruel House Mother's own final chapter, which is hideous but perfectly clear).

One of the effects of this device is that for those inmates least sensate and furthest advanced in their disintegration, a large amount of blank space comes to appear on the page. From the pauses that sometimes break up the largely coherent prose of the earlier chapters, the empty spaces grow until we have, particularly in the George Hedbury and Rosetta Stanton chapters, only scattered thoughts – in fact, often single words, too glancing and partial to be thoughts. Here the context provided by the device, the way the timing of the evening has been laid across the 21 pages of each chapter, means that the blanks are not simply blank: they appear not just as an absence, but *capture the progressive death of a head emptying out*. It's a poignant effect, otherwise impossible – and it would have been betrayed by any attempt to convey it in language (which would have to assert the presence of meaning, however degraded).

It is the discovery in the technology of the book of a way to make the blank page articulate. That is what Johnson achieves by struggling against his printers' straitjacket, and against the limits of convention.

One more thing that can be said about the quote above, the quote in which B.S. Johnson defends *Albert Angelo* and quotes from *Albert Angelo's* defence of itself is that 'A page is an area on which I may place any signs I consider to communicate most nearly what I have to convey' does not seem a controversial statement on the rights of the author. In fact, we know that Johnson goes further – he knows that, however we might normally conceive of it, a page is not just 'an area': it is sculptural, an object that exists in space. Therefore, you can cut into it; therefore you can bind it to others like it in different ways or not at all.

Even so, the claim is modest: an author should have control of their work and should do with it whatever they think best serves their purpose.

Truman Capote wrote something remarkably similar to Coren's dismissal of *The Unfortunates* when he was given Michel Butor's *Mobile* to review. *Mobile* is a novel and a kind of travelogue of America, which manages the placement of type on the page – the indentation of a line, the space between fragments – to create its rhythm. Capote wrote: '*Mobile* is not readable. At any rate I haven't been able to get through it, though it was supposedly my duty to do so.'

In both cases the novels haven't dropped beneath contempt (they're awash with contempt), they have fallen out of consideration as novels, so the critic no longer needs to read them to be able to criticise. Capote opens his review: 'The anti-novel novelists (anti-writing writers, really) continue to be the smartest mannequins in the showrooms of Parisian haute-culture.'<sup>17</sup> When Coren dismisses *The Unfortunates* having read only three chapters he does so on the basis that 'as far as the late and cripplingly experimental BSJ was concerned, that would have been as valid a reading of his novel as any.'

While presumably Capote and Coren believe there is a degree of flexibility in how an author is allowed to make their book (permitted to name their own characters, a more or less free choice of plots, a range of adjectives available ...) there seems to exist some limit to this freedom: Johnson and Butor have acted in some way to undermine the legitimacy of their books.

Johnson writes nothing to suggest that he would believe (as Coren announces he would) that abandoning *The Unfortunates* after three chapters would be 'as valid a reading [...] as any' – he labels one section as 'Last', with the implicit suggestion (if an author has to make one about the end of their book) that it should be reached, and nowhere tells the reader that they should feel comfortable leaving material out. (As Julio Cortázar does in *Hopscotch*, when he presents the reader with two ways of reading, one of which proceeds linearly and then ends about halfway in to the volume: 'the reader may ignore what follows with a clean conscience.' [in 'Table of Instructions']) If I'm making a more informed guess about what Johnson might have thought of Coren it would be that he'd

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<sup>17</sup> It seems that Frenchness plays some part in the literary offence with which Capote is concerned: in this first paragraph (as well as 'the showrooms of Parisian haute-culture') he refers to 'the latest and cutest displays of Robbe-Grillet *et cie*' and 'an even vaguer *nouvelle vague*'.

count him among the ‘stupid and inattentive’ unable to see that ‘there is always a cogent reason’ for his devices: ‘I’m not writing for idiots or skippers’ he wrote to his friend and collaborator Zulfikar Ghose. [Ghose, p28]

Meanwhile Butor’s experiments with type are extreme enough for Capote to call him an ‘anti-writing writer’; he mentions too Marc Saporti and his *Composition No. 1*, that comes, like *The Unfortunates*, loose in a box<sup>18</sup> and which Capote describes as ‘an object said to be a novel.’ For both Coren and Capote it is enough to see these books and thereby to know that they have dispatched with convention before dispensing with them.

Roland Barthes writes, on the response to *Mobile*: ‘Behind every collective rejection of a book by our stock criticism we must look for *what has been offended*. *Mobile* offended the very idea of the Book.’ [‘Literature and Discontinuity’, p171]

[T]he *Book-as-Object* is materially identified with the *Book-as-Idea*, the technique of printing with the literary institution, so that to attack the material regularity of the work is to attack the very idea of literature [...] to say of *Mobile* that ‘it’s not a book’ is obviously to enclose the being and the meaning of literature in a pure protocol, as if this same literature was a rite which would lose all effectiveness the day we formally violated any of its rules: the Book is a High Mass, and it matters little whether or not it is said with piety, provided its every element proceeds in order. [‘Literature and Discontinuity’, p173]

This dissertation is about the deviation from the rules of the High Mass. I want to consider what deviation is brooked and what is not, why the protocol is valued for its own sake, as well as attempt to understand the temptation to deviate, and where it’s led me in my own creative practice.

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<sup>18</sup> Unlike *The Unfortunates*, which it predates, it is *entirely* loose leaf – there are no sections longer than a page. *House Mother Normal* has its own predecessor: *Tea with Mrs Goodman* by Philip Toynbee, which recursively narrates a tea party in a similar manner, each narration corresponding in its layout to the pages of the others.

# THE PARTS OF THE SHOE

THERE IS A PASSAGE IN Don DeLillo's *Underworld* in which Father Paulus, a priest at a Jesuit reform school, challenges Nick Shay, one of his pupils, to name the parts of the shoe. Laces, Shay manages. Sole and heel. Then he drifts to a halt. 'There's not much to name, is there?' he says. 'A front and a top.'<sup>19</sup> Father Paulus draws from him that the name for the flap beneath the lace is the tongue. And that the holes that the lace pierces are eyelets. He tells him that the name for the strip of material around the top of the shoe is the cuff. The stiff section above the heel: the counter. The strip above the sole: the welt. Between the welt and the cuff is the quarter. The hard tips that reinforce the ends of the laces are aglets; the reinforcements that ring the eyelets (through which the aglets pass) are grommets.

Father Paulus says, 'You don't know how to see the thing because you don't know how to look. And you don't know how to look because you don't know the names.' He says, 'How everyday things lie hidden. Because we don't know what they're called.'

What are the parts of a book?

There is a front and a back, there are the pages: not much to name. Let's make the attempt though. As well as pages and a cover (front and back), there is a fore-edge, a spine and tail. There may, if the book is a hardback, be a jacket with front and back flaps. If it's a paperback it may (more unusually) have French flaps. It may have endpapers. It will in all likelihood consist of a number of signatures – each of which was originally a single sheet that was then folded and folded and cut and bound with others just like it in sequence. Within the book each two page spread has a verso page on the left and a recto on the right, and beginning at page 1 (actually page *i* – prelims being

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<sup>19</sup> This quote and the rest of the exchange: Don DeLillo, *Underworld*, p540–541.

conventionally numbered with lowercase roman numerals) we will probably come to at least a half-title page, a title page and an imprint page before we reach the text proper (we may also pass through a contents page, a preface, an introduction, a bibliography of other books by the same author, translator's or editor's notes – anyway, some quantity or arrangement of these or other, similar devices). And once we arrive there, there will be a typesetting framework of (it is likely) running heads and page numbers that surrounds and supports the text block.

And it's this text block that is the author's residence, a home placed and built for them, constructed to a height of 30-something lines and a width of about 66 characters,<sup>20</sup> their control as limited or expansive as this: they are able to fill it however they choose, to 'place any signs [they] consider to communicate most nearly what [they] have to convey.'

Things can get terminologically complicated when we discuss the parts of books or try to group types of books; maybe there are similar competing taxonomical strategies to contend with once you get deeply involved in cobbling.

In the case of the kind of books that construct their meaning or their effect by, for example, the unusual placement of type on the page (like, for example, Michel Butor's *Mobile* or Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves*) or by leaving evidence of a previous text (or texts) from which it has been constructed (for example, Tom Phillips' *A Humument*, Jonathan Safran Foer's *Tree of Codes*, Graham Rawle's *Woman's World*) or otherwise make unconventional use of the technology of the book (the author declining to constrain themselves to the text block and to allow convention and their publisher to dictate the rest): for these books Alison Gibbons uses the word 'multimodal'.<sup>21</sup> (Although as soon as you consider the term you mentally encounter the antonym and find yourself faced

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<sup>20</sup> The number of lines per page varies more widely, but as Mitchell and Wightman write on line-length: 'This is one of the few occasions where a rule exists: that lines of continuous justified text should ideally contain an average of between 66 and 72 characters, including word spaces – that is approximately 9 to 11 words.' [p33] Or, for example, from Bringhurst: 'Anything from 45 to 75 characters is widely regarded as a satisfactory length of line for a single-column page set in a serifed text face in a text size. The 66-character line (counting both letters and spaces) is widely regarded as ideal.' [p26]

<sup>21</sup> 'Novels in this generic grouping ["multimodal printed literature"] employ multiple semiotic modalities, primarily the verbal and the visual.' [Gibbons, p1]



with a problem: a ‘monomodal’ text is unthinkable. The text is never disembodied, and the body, however much it might wish to recede into the cool shadows of our inattention, always bears meaning.<sup>22</sup> And if a monomodal text is impossible, then how meaningful can ‘multimodal’ be?)

Or an alternative vocabulary from William H. Gass:

Theodore Dreiser wrote as if words had little resonance, no sound, no shape, as if their inscription were invisible, and he employed a syntax as uncomplicated and casual as a wad of cotton. He is a preliterate novelist, and indeed we do soon wish to pass through his words to the world he is asking us to imagine [...] Henry James feels a larger obligation, and plumps his pages like a pillow, for he is literate to a fault like the golden bowl’s. Joyce worries about the color of the cover for *Ulysses*, since he is transliterate. [*“Tropes of the Text”, p150*]

Maybe then those authors who actively exploit areas of the book that are often left to the typesetter or the publisher’s design or production departments are, in the manner of Joyce and the terminology of Gass, being ‘transliterate’.

Or perhaps we should stay with the visibility of the inscription. Carl Darryl Malmgren judges ‘most realistic fiction’ as belonging with the preliterate Dreiser: this fiction, ‘hopes to compel readers to look through its transparent language, as they look through a window to the “real life” that it presents.’ [*p46*] The writing that does not do this, that on the contrary draws attention to its inscription, setting out ‘to capitalize on the materiality of the discourse’ (which is ‘often dismissed as “gimmicky”’) is making use of what he terms its ‘iconic space.’ [*p46*]

Ferdinand Kriwet is also concerned with whether we see literature; as he puts it, ‘a *visually perceptible* literature employs typography and surface in such a way as to make seeing and reading a single act.’ [*p210*] And Kenneth Goldsmith shares this concern too, using the metaphor of the opacity slider in Photoshop: the language of ‘functional discourse, the sort of language used to write a newspaper editorial or caption a

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<sup>22</sup> Gibbons recognizes this issue: ‘Indeed many of its theorists have acknowledged that, strictly speaking, there is no such thing as a monomodal text.’ [*p8*]

photograph' [p35] he puts at the fully transparent end of the slider, with finely turned, self-conscious prose (Goldsmith uses Nabokov as his example, but equally the plumped pages of Henry James) a bit further up, and then, at the extreme end, 'the slider all the way up to 100% opacity,' [p35] there is language thought of and used according to its material quality – by concrete poets, situationists, and other practitioners of what he calls 'uncreative writing.' [passim]

Michael Kaufmann, as well as considering how 'visible' we find different kinds of writing, uses the term 'metatextual'. While metafictional books might draw attention to their status by comment, 'metatextual books emphatically assert their print and paper bodies' [p15] – they exploit their material presence in such a way as to make that materiality impossible to ignore (rather than the fiction asserting its own fictionhood, the body asserting the body).

Or, there is this identifiable feature of this kind of work: that it is not easily transposable. It has been made in consideration of its final produced form and some attributes of that form are necessary to its existence. So to describe those works that can be easily moved from one container to another without losing much that is vital along the way – those more conventional books that can exist easily as a Royal hardback, or as an A-format paperback, or as an epub – these we could refer to as 'transmedial'.<sup>23</sup> (Except 'transmedia' is also used in this, different, oppositional sense: narratives that are conducted across different media, as for example, a television show that extends its story onto the internet, into a game, and so on.)

What are the parts of the book?

Perhaps the most obvious distinction, the most casually and absolutely made, is between the text and the rest. This is the novel as we often think of it, a neat Cartesian dualism: the pure, disembodied text, and the contingent, perhaps even irrelevant physical artefact in which it is held, the corporeal shambles that carries it around.<sup>24</sup>

Genette, maybe the great lexicographer of the book, divides it this way: into the text and the paratext, though within the paratext Genette includes not just those

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<sup>23</sup> For this use of 'transmedial' see, for example, [Eskelinen](#).

<sup>24</sup> In this sense, the book is to the text as the artist is to the work: 'What's any artist, but the dregs of his work? the human shambles that follows it around' [[Gaddis](#), p95–96]

elements contained within (or constituting) the same volume as the text itself (these being the peritext) but also material further removed, occurring outwith the volume, from author interviews, to early versions of a work, to an author's letters, or the known content of their private conversations (the epitext).<sup>25</sup> The paratext exists at the threshold of the text, liminal to it; it exists to present the text to the reader.<sup>26</sup>

So we have another possible way of defining these odd non-conformist books that deliberately overreach, transforming the normal substance of the book into something strange for their own purposes: their authors are inhabiting the disputed territory of the publisher's peritext, taking what typically belongs to the publisher and claiming it, textualising it.

And just as a monomodal text is inconceivable, 'one may doubtless assert that a text without a paratext does not exist and never has existed.' [*Paratexts*, p3] The body of the book conveys meaning, it affects, always affects, our reading. Let's take as an example the typeface in which a book is set.

And, for an example, this experiment that the documentary maker Errol Morris conducted: on the *New York Times* website he presented readers with a statement for them to respond to under the heading, 'Are You An Optimist or a Pessimist?' The statement was a short paragraph on the 'unprecedented safety' of humans living in an age in which it would be possible to defend ourselves in the event of an impending collision with a sizeable asteroid. Did readers believe the statement? How confident were they in their decision?

About a month and 45,000 respondents later, Morris wrote an essay [*'Hear, All Ye People, Harken, O Earth (Part 1)'*] in which he revealed that the quiz was not, in fact, about optimism and pessimism. Instead, visitors to the page had been presented the same text in one of six randomly determined typefaces (Baskerville, Computer Modern, Georgia, Helvetica, Comic Sans or Trebuchet) and the purpose of the experiment had been to see whether and how their credulity had been influenced by the typeface. (It

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<sup>25</sup> For these, see *passim* Gérard Genette, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*.

<sup>26</sup> As Genette says, 'in the usual sense of the verb but also in the strongest sense: to *make present*, to ensure the text's presence in the world, its "reception" and consumption in the form, (nowadays, at least) of a book.' [*Paratexts*, p1] The work of the paratext is 'not to "look nice" around the text but rather to ensure for the text a destiny consistent with the author's purpose.' [*Paratexts*, p407]

was: Baskerville seems to have been the most trustworthy face.)<sup>27</sup>

Alison Gibbons refers to experimental studies on the fluency with which a typeface can be read<sup>28</sup> in which it was shown ‘that participants judge a task to be harder and more time-consuming when it is imparted in the more difficult-to-read typeface. Moreover, participants expressed less willingness to undertake the given exercise in the difficult-to-read font.’ [p174]

The fact is, though, that the reason I feel so convinced that the publisher’s peritext always affects our reading of a book is not because of experimental studies but because of my own experience – principally as a reader but also as someone who has worked on some shoes in his time.

I’ve worked, full-time or freelance, for maybe eight different publishers. I was, years ago now, a copywriter at Penguin, writing the blurb for hundreds of books; the blurb (or its French counterpart, *le prière d’insérer*, the please-insert) which Genette kindly calls, ‘a highly fragile and precarious paratextual element, an endangered masterpiece, a baby seal of publishing, for which no amount of solicitude will be superfluous.’ [Paratexts, p116] (I don’t necessarily feel quite the same warmth towards it.)

The blurb is perhaps more acceptable to people as a potentially transformative element in their experience of the book than some other parts of the paratext.<sup>29</sup> It is already made of text, the same matter as the book proper, and it trades in the same information, though in a different fashion and under different pressures. For an example of the difference notice how protagonist’s names occur in blurbs, where often the first two words of a blurb will provide a full name to have a definite referent,<sup>30</sup> while in the text itself, particularly in first person narratives, this information will not appear until it has some reason to do so. This is the blurb’s economy and also its guilelessness: there is a directness in the blurb’s relationship to the text and also in its relationship to the

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<sup>27</sup> Morris also mentions a blog post by Phil Renaud in which Renaud compares the grades of 52 essays written across his university career and finds that the grades he received seemed to correlate with the typeface in which he had set them, and hazards why that might be the case. Times New Roman essays got him an average A-, Trebuchet MS essays a B- and Georgia essays an A.

<sup>28</sup> By Hyunjin Song and Norbert Schwarz.

<sup>29</sup> Even if the reaction of some to that potential power is to avoid the blurb.

<sup>30</sup> Or the first two words of the synopsis beneath an opening shoutline.

(potential) reader, with whom it is engaged in a relatively straightforward transactional relationship. We could talk for a long time about the purpose of the novel; the purpose of the blurb, though, is simpler: to secure the book a readership, to sell it. But none the less, if we approach the book through the blurb then it informs our reading.

As with much of the paratext we become most aware of it when it is badly done. The blurb can be notable for trading in clichés – a magisterial page-turner about a strange cast of characters that reads like a thriller until, suddenly, everything changes, forever ...<sup>31</sup> – and for other sins that any piece of bad writing can be guilty of, but it can also betray its relationship to the text. (There are books I have taken a black marker to the back cover of to protect the next reader – even if it's most likely to be me: I have a bad memory, I may need protected – to save them from reading something more than a blurb should supply, taken from deeper in the book than a blurb should reach: some years ago a Penguin edition of Camus's *The Plague*, and more recently a Vintage edition of José Saramago's *Blindness*.<sup>32</sup>)

More than just blurbs though. At Penguin most of my work was on the Penguin Modern Classics and Black Classics lists. The distinction is that, roughly speaking, books written in the past 100 years (more or less), belong to the Modern Classics list, books written earlier to the Black Classics. We called them Black Classics<sup>33</sup> because of the cover designs; you know what these books look like, you'll have them on your shelves. On the front cover the lower third is a black rectangle and contains the title and author's name, the top two thirds is filled by an image, normally a painting of roughly the era of the book's original publication, and the two sections are separated by a white horizontal stripe (bearing the Penguin Classics colophon), which continues onto the black spine and black back cover.

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<sup>31</sup> The ellipsis in particular becomes overwhelmingly tempting when writing a blurb, let me tell you.

<sup>32</sup> I just remembered that this habit started young: when I was maybe 10? slightly older? and read a book of Isaac Asimov short stories belonging to my parents. All of the stories were of the twist-in-the-tale type, so, for example, in one that I can remember a child finds a strange, tiny creature that has appeared on their family's property. Only at the end do we realize that the creature is a human astronaut and the child who has found him belongs to a race of gigantic aliens. They all turned on a revelation of this kind. The blurb went through and in a sentence on each story neatly spoiled their endings one by one.

<sup>33</sup> I found this out at my interview for the job where the two people interviewing me used the term and I had to ask them to clarify.

If I was asked to picture a classic novel, this design is probably what would hazily appear to me, and it would, I think, even if I had never worked for Penguin, never worked in or near publishing. That hazy image has been laid in my head as deliberately as if it was the foundation of a pyramid: it is the work of hundreds of individuals, working in design, production, editorial, and marketing, labouring over the course of decades to a common purpose (I got to put in some hours). It has been built from the material of the books themselves, while in turn it has worked to contribute to their solidity as art, as canon – the book and the presentation of the book shoring each other up. The result is that an individual Penguin Classic makes the reader anticipate certain things from it because it belongs to the larger set – and to anticipate is to have your reading shaped. In the same way as the scholarly apparatus within a Black Classic exists to inform and determine my reading, the apparatus of Penguin Classics as a cultural institution informs and determines my reading of every Penguin Classic.

But every decision about a book, from the typeface it is set in, to the format,<sup>34</sup> to the cover it has been given, to the weight of the paper, the size of the gutters and the laudatory quotes on the front, to the other books in the series, and the image of the author above the blurb, prime the reader and affect how they will ultimately react to the work itself.<sup>35</sup> To work in publishing, to typeset a book or consider whether or not a particular cover should have an embossed title: these things foreground this understanding, but it exists anyway. An elegantly made clothbound hardback and a print-on-demand paperback with cheap lamination peeling from its cover can contain the same text and yet not be the same.

The book, even the conventionally formatted book, is not a simple object, and to the extent that as readers we accept it as a simple object, we have habit to blame or to thank. Through long tradition, publishers have conspired with authors to train us to think of the technology of the book as fundamentally neutral. We read without paying

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<sup>34</sup> For a very brief introduction to issues of format – the commercial considerations and implicit indicators of quality and genre involved – see [Honor Wilson-Fletcher, 'Why Size Matters.'](#)

<sup>35</sup> This is no less true for ebooks, though in their case a lot of these decisions will be made not by a designer considering an individual title but by choices made at the device level, by technical considerations and by the user's own preferences (within the limited control they have been given). And I'll get to ebooks, I will, I think.

### *The parts of the shoe*

attention to the scaffolding of the text, allowing it to exist invisibly, as unconsidered as a shoe's welt. We read to get at the text itself – pure, disembodied: what Genette defines as 'a more or less long sequence of verbal statements, more or less endowed with significance.' [*Paratexts*, p1] And the encumbrances of the physical book, unsanctified by the author's attention, we ignore.

But the body of the book speaks. And if it speaks the question is, why should an author not be interested in what it has to say?

# TYPOGRAPHICAL MUCKING ABOUT

ALL PRESSED IN GOLD FOIL into the card-covering buckram skin of the book: the figure of a man (held, like Leonardo da Vinci's Vitruvian Man, in a circle), a quotation from the poet Alan Jackson, and, around them both, a pattern made by the repetition of an uppercase serified Y in rows (alternating in each row between standing upright and then fully inverted: the arms of the Y made into legs, the letter standing astride). We will find out later that this is not just a decorative motif, that it is encoded pornography.

The protagonist of the book – a novel, Alasdair Gray's 1982, *Janine* – is a lonely technician (an installer of security systems) in an anonymous hotel room; he is kept for much of the book's length from suicide – from devouring the contents of a bottle of pills he keeps in his coat pocket – only because 'the coat is far away in the wardrobe.' [p96] Unable to sleep and desperate to avoid thoughts of his own life, he attempts to pass the time until morning in creating sadistic fantasies about women – Janine, Superb ('being short for superbitch' [p19]), Big Momma, Helga. These are not just straightforward scenes of sexual violence and rape, rather they have elaborate settings, cast lists and costumes (the costumes, especially their fastenings, their buttons and studs, are attended to with particular, fetishistic care). They involve powerful organisations created for the capture and abuse of women – from a counterfeit police station, to a country club of only a dozen unimaginably wealthy members, to 'the vast multinational Forensic Research Punishment and Sexual Gratification Syndicate,' [p113] resembling in its gothic, capitalist, carnal excesses the wild power-and-flesh dystopias of William Burroughs, but with an innocuous installer of security systems as its chairman.<sup>36</sup>

In one of these fantasies, to be 'an orgasm race using hairdryers' [p106], the

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<sup>36</sup> Will Self, in his introduction to the current paperback edition, also makes this connection, calling the Syndicate 'distinctly Burroughsian.' [page xiii]



technician imagines his women standing, wrists tied above their heads ('wearing very tight shrinkfit jeans' and 'wedgedoled sandals with, ah, eight-inch heels'<sup>37</sup>), with each foot 'on an isolated block or brick which is twelve inches high and far apart from its neighbour [...] Singly each woman stands like an upsidedown capital Y and together they look like a short row of  $\Lambda \Lambda \Lambda \Lambda$  yes  $\Lambda \Lambda \Lambda \Lambda$  yes  $\Lambda \Lambda \Lambda \Lambda$  yes but try not to get carried away.' [p106]

So as the technician, Jock McLeish, drifts into happy contemplation of this fantasy ('hullo my dears  $\Lambda \Lambda \Lambda \Lambda \Lambda \Lambda \Lambda$  yes carry on  $\Lambda \Lambda \Lambda \Lambda \Lambda \Lambda \Lambda \Lambda \Lambda \Lambda \Lambda$ ' [p107]) we have the clue to understanding the front cover. The central figure is surrounded by an arrangement of female bodies: he is a man surrounded by a constellation of women, though they exist only as ornament – like all of McLeish's fantasies these are not real women, but are summoned to serve a purpose, for contemplation (spread-legged to appeal to the man's pornographic imagination), not for any existence of their own.<sup>38</sup>

Gray designed and illustrated the cover of the book (the hardback first edition, with its buckram and foil<sup>39</sup>), and the care taken with it is typical of his approach to his work.

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<sup>37</sup> The imagined shoes often stretch the plausible limits of fashion and biology.

<sup>38</sup> Self's introduction also mentions the illustrative use of the letter and this section of the narrative, calling it a 'reverie, the painful denouement of which – it's [sic] resolution in querulous, querying cunnilingus – is indicated in the reversal of the Ys.' [page xiv] This is an aside, and one I almost feel like I should approach with schoolboy trepidation, as though I might stumble into embarrassing myself (revealing to my playground friends that I don't understand the mechanics of sex), but the fact is: I have no idea what Self is talking about there, none at all, it baffles me. Oral sex is nowhere mentioned or hinted at (as far as this fantasy is concerned). Having carefully positioned his victims, McLeish's reverie drifts into unconsciousness, and the reversed Ys, reverse again: after 10 lines of  $\Lambda \Lambda \Lambda \Lambda \Lambda \Lambda \Lambda \Lambda$  we get 10 lines of Y Y Y Y Y Y Y Y. (I'd suggest you can read those Y Y Y Y Ys as a play on the comic book notation 'ZZZZZZ': they are the loss of the image, the fantasy, to sleep). Then Jock awakes ('Y Y Y Y Y Y Y Y You bastard Y Y Y Y Y Y Yahoohay, another of those dreams. I have not dreamed that for twenty-five years.' [p107]) and is pleased: 'I am glad I fell asleep before imagining the orgasm race.' [p108]

No resolution – querying, querulous and cunnilingual, or achieved by means of a hairdryer, or of any other type – is reached. Self has misremembered the text, or at any rate, somehow allowed himself to become separated from it. But, it's a small point, so yahoohay.

<sup>39</sup> Gray in an interview writes, 'Of course, my control of design and cover does not extend to paperback and foreign editions.' [Axelrod, p114] (Although it might be fairer to say that his control of design under these other circumstances is merely less total: as we'll see, text and layout are often interdependent, so while a publisher of a foreign or paperback edition may have their own ideas for jacket design, they cannot always interfere in the interior of the text without consequence.)

Often his books will be illustrated throughout by Gray himself, sometimes they will make light of publishing convention by excerpting not just complimentary but also highly critical reviews.<sup>40</sup> There might be other interventions into the peritext: the first edition of *Unlikely Stories, Mostly* included an erratum slip: ‘This erratum slip has been included by mistake.’ (The paperback includes printed onto page *i*: ‘ERRATUM *The publishers apologise for the loss of the erratum slip.*’) He has also used the layout of type creatively – though he writes in longhand (or by dictation), he will sit with a typesetter to achieve the effect he intends.<sup>41</sup>

The most typographically complicated section of *1982, Janine* comes when – the pills having finally become so tempting and his own thoughts so painful that even the distance to the wardrobe is no longer enough to prevent him – McLeish takes the whole bottle of barbiturates with his whisky. There follows a ‘ministry of voices,’ [p168–175] in which his inner monologue fractures into parts. Gray describes it:

On one margin the voice of his body complains of the feverish temperature he’s condemned it to, while in the middle his deranged libido fantasizes and alternates with his deranged conscience denouncing him for having such fantasies. On the other margin, in very small print, the voice of God<sup>42</sup> tries to tell him something important, tell him he has missed the point of living in a voice he can hardly hear, because it is not thunderously denouncing, to correct him in gentle, sensible words [Moore, p55/6]

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<sup>40</sup> Both real and invented by Gray.

<sup>41</sup> There might be some insight into what manner of collaborator Gray is in a short story titled ‘A Short Tale of Woe!’ written by Joe Murray, who has often typeset Gray’s work. In it, a man queues at an unreal job-allocation bureaucracy that might (in its industrial hellishness) almost belong to the Unthank section of *Lanark*. When it is his turn at the head of the line he is given a bucket with a hole in the bottom and told he must use it to empty the Clyde. Complaining that the job is impossible, he is instead handed a stack of paper. He realizes that the stack is Gray’s *Book of Prefaces* which he is to typeset, and the story ends as the man begs desperately to be given back his bucket. (Elsewhere he has said of the experience of working with Gray on *The Book of Prefaces*, ‘The phrase “I have an idea” still makes me shudder.’ [‘Making Books with Alasdair Gray,’ p13])

<sup>42</sup> I’ve said that the ministry is composed of fractured parts of McLeish’s inner monologue despite God’s presence, because even McLeish is fairly conscience that it is a God of his own making, addressing Him later in the novel: ‘GET THEE BEHIND ME GOD [...] for Christ’s sake if you psychoanalyse me you will discover you too are nothing but my imagination.’ [p320] Satan also appears in the ministry.

These different voices begin but do not stay neatly restrained to columns. For several pages they compete for space, narrowing or spreading outward, text can appear set sideways or upside down – until finally McLeish vomits up the pills he has swallowed and, for a few blank pages, sleeps.

The ministry of voices is not the only example of what Gray has called his ‘typographical mucking about.’ [Moore, p55] In *Lanark*, for example, he introduces his ‘Index of Plagiarisms’ alongside the narrative in an inset column, and in the short story ‘Logopandocy’ the narrator Sir Thomas Urquhart is listing the facts of his current condition under two headings, ‘PRO ME’ and ‘CONTRA ME’, until the contra side grows and overwhelms the pro.

(Gray: ‘the tapering columns of type in Logopandocy of Unlikely Stories Mostly and in 1982 Janine [sic] derive from the mouse’s tail in Alice in Wonderland.’ [White, *Reading the Graphic Surface*, p342]<sup>43</sup> Though in the epilogue to 1982, *Janine* itself he credits the ‘graphic use of typeface’ to ‘Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy* and poems by Ian Hamilton Finlay and Edwin Morgan.’ [p334])

But, as well as these large scale typographic outrages (enough to have Truman Capote asking to see a passport on suspicion of unpardonable Frenchness), there are more subtle attentions paid to the apparatus of the book. In 1982, *Janine* these include a table of contents with archaic, paragraph-long descriptions of the subject of each chapter, and the ‘running shoulders’ set in the margin alongside the text block. Typically a running shoulder, like a running head, might be used to give the current chapter’s title, but in 1982, *Janine* they provide an extremely short précis of the page on which they appear (so on page 107, where  $\lambda \lambda \lambda \lambda$  turns to Y Y Y Y, and McLeish dreams of walking through Glasgow and meeting a friend of his who has died years before, the running shoulder reads ‘A HAPPY DREAM’).<sup>44</sup>

It is also, like all of Gray’s fiction, unusual in how its paragraphs are set.

Normally in fiction the first line of a new paragraph is indented (not by much

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<sup>43</sup> Elsewhere he has said that *Alice in Wonderland* is ‘probably my first experience of an author using typography imaginatively to give the text an extra dimension.’ [Campbell, p15]

<sup>44</sup> He uses running shoulders in much the same way throughout the short story collection *Ten Tales Tall & True*. And in the same section of *Lanark* as the Index of Plagiarisms – the meeting with the conjuror, who claims to be Lanark’s author – the running heads perform a similar condensed narration, though in slightly less terse fashion.

– something like 5mm would be typical). A line of dialogue will (usually – in fact, take ‘usually’ as read for all of this: we are dealing with convention<sup>45</sup>) be preceded by a line-break, and the opening quotation mark will go at the beginning of the line after the indent.

A line-space, after which the first line of a new section may or may not be indented, indicates and effects a more substantial break in the text than a paragraph break (it will probably mark a change of scene, a shift in setting or time), though it is still less emphatic than either a larger break with decoration or a chapter break.<sup>46</sup>

Not all of these types of break will be used in every novel, but that’s the hierarchy from which authors (or their publisher (or their publisher’s typesetter) acting on their behalf) draw.



Gray’s paragraphs don’t resemble other people’s, but this eccentricity seems to have gone unremarked, even though it’s been the case ever since *Lanark*, his first novel, published in 1981. In *A Life in Pictures*, Gray describes the formatting of his paragraphs, and how he persuaded his then-publisher to accommodate his unusual wishes:

In most books the start of a new paragraph is shown by indenting the first line [...] and in novels the start of a character’s speech is indented in the same way, which

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<sup>45</sup> John Self in Amis’s *Money*: “‘Yeah,” I said, and started smoking another cigarette. Unless I specifically inform you otherwise, I’m always smoking another cigarette.’ [p8] When I talk about how books are formatted, assume I am talking in generalities about the conventional, ‘monomodal’ way of doing things; forgive me for it.

<sup>46</sup> Some commentary on styles of section breaks exists in Gray’s work. In *Poor Things*, Godwin Baxter is a brilliant Victorian doctor, but huge and hideous, more monstrous than his creation (his Frankenstein’s monster) Bella Baxter – a suicide he has returned to life with the brain of her own unborn child. At one point Godwin gives as evidence of Bella’s ‘mental growth’ that she begins to separate the sections of her letters with a horizontal line rather than ‘a playful row of stars.’ [p151] Bella is self-aware in her use of breaks too: when she finds herself strong enough to tell Godwin the events of a traumatic experience in Alexandria (a violent lesson she has received in social injustice), she writes, ‘it is so important that I will divide it from the rest of my letter with another line.’ [p173]

splits a paragraph into as many smaller paragraphs as the speeches. I wanted all my paragraphs to be seen and read as separate units, so asked that no speeches start by being indented from the margin by more than their quotation marks, and for paragraphs to be separated by a line space before each indented first line. Stephanie [Wolfe Murray, one of the founders of the publisher, Canongate] feared this might look queer, asked her design director to print a specimen page, and saw it did not look queer. [p211-212]

So in an Alasdair Gray novel (or story) each paragraph is more distinct from its siblings than it would be if it were made to fit another writer's pages (as he keeps them a line-space distant) but these paragraphs hold lines of dialogue uncommonly close to themselves (dialogue begins on a new line but is not indented). From the first book of fiction to the most recent, this has always been the case.

Elsewhere in an interview: 'I've always had strong ideas on how my novels should look [...] For example, some designers indent lines when a new person speaks – I hate that. You already indent a new paragraph, so why do it to open speech marks?' [Booth]

Those two quotes, both from Gray, together constitute all of the material that I have been able to find on this idiosyncratic choice.<sup>47</sup> As with Johnson, the most immediately visible, graphic peculiarities in Gray's books attract a great deal of the attention of his critics. (Perhaps in a less belittling manner: if Johnson is likely to be accused of gimmickry for his devices, Gray is often, rather more flatteringly, compared to Blake for his use of image and text together.<sup>48</sup> The 'typographical mucking about' is also much attended to.)

Why does the fact that he paragraphs unlike anyone else escape comment? Is it because no one thinks it matters? Does it matter?

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<sup>47</sup> There is a glancing mention in *Reading the Graphic Surface*. White notices the eccentricity when trying to get the chapter and paragraph references included in the index of plagiarisms to correspond to the text: 'Once we grasp that a paragraph in *Lanark* is that which is separated from the text above and below it by a linespace we can find, for example [...] [p312] From the way this is phrased, it seems that the question of what constitutes a paragraph in *Lanark* hasn't otherwise arisen, and it doesn't receive any further comment.'

<sup>48</sup> For example: 'He is our nearest contemporary equivalent to Blake' says the *Evening Standard*, according to a cover quote on *Ten Tales Tall & True*. 'Often talked about as the "modern successor to William Blake."' [Lindsay]

# AH, IT'S SO EASY TO DISOBEY A DEAD PERSON

IN *TESTAMENTS BETRAYED*, MILAN KUNDERA writes at length about the posthumous mistreatment of Kafka.

The abuses and betrayals of Kafka that he is concerned with go beyond the one great betrayal with which we are all familiar: that, in the event of his death, his friend Max Brod was to burn and did not. That instead he 'published *everything*, indiscriminately,' erasures, diaries, letters, 'even that long, painful letter found in a drawer, the letter that Kafka never decided to send to his father and that, thanks to Brod, anyone but its addressee could eventually read.' [p262]

For this Kundera holds Brod to unforgiving account. ('Brod's indiscretion is inexcusable. He betrayed his friend. He acted against his friend's wishes, against the meaning and the spirit of his wishes, against the sense of shame he knew in the man.' [p262])<sup>49</sup> And also for the other posthumous indignity of 'Kafkology' – writing that removes Kafka's books from art and aesthetics, takes them out of 'the *large context* of literary history' and places them instead in 'the *microcontext* of biography'; [p40]<sup>50</sup> writing

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<sup>49</sup> Not everything, in Kundera's view, had to be burned – he quotes Kafka's own orders, which assessed the work and determined: 'Of all my writings, only the books are worthwhile [*gelten*]: *Judgment, Stoker, Metamorphosis, Penal Colony, Country Doctor*, and a story: "Hunger Artist."' [p256] And Kundera finds himself also a betrayer: he plays the mental game we perhaps all play when we think of Kafka's testament – considering what he would do in Brod's place – and decides he would burn, as requested, the fiction that Kafka did not think worthwhile, as well as the stuff of the life (letters, diaries), but the three novels... 'No, I would not have been capable of obeying Kafka's instructions dogmatically to the letter [...] But my disobedience (a disobedience strictly limited to these three novels) I would have considered an *exception* I had made on my own responsibility, at my own moral risk, and made as a person *violating a law*, not denying or nullifying it.' [p275]

(Though if Brod's indiscretion is 'inexcusable,' Kundera finds it within himself to excuse his own: 'I would have acted with the certainty that, in the beyond, I would manage to persuade their author that I had betrayed neither him nor his work.' [p275])

<sup>50</sup> Kundera elsewhere: 'The moment Kafka draws more attention than Joseph K., the process of Kafka's posthumous dying begins.' [*The Art of the Novel*, p146]

that bestows sainthood on Kafka and from the novels 'decodes religious messages, it deciphers philosophical parables' [p42] – for Kafkology too Brod is blamed, as the man who led the way, beginning soon after Kafka's death: 'Max Brod created the image of Kafka and that of his work; he created Kafkology at the same time.' [p40]

Other abuses that Kundera laments have come from other hands. Translators who have enriched Kafka's vocabulary and reduced his repetitions in a (misguided) pursuit of 'good style' (when 'every author of some value transgresses against "good style"' [p107]), and who introduced semicolons and paragraph breaks, subjecting the novels 'to an articulation that is not their own.' [p114]

And looking at a German paperback of the edition of *The Castle*, Kundera finds 'on a small page, thirty-nine appallingly cramped lines,' even though:

Kafka insisted that his books be printed in very large type. These days that is recalled with the indulgent smile prompted by great men's whims. Yet nothing about it warrants a smile; Kafka's wish was justified, logical, serious, related to his aesthetic, or, more specifically, to his way of articulating prose.

An author who divides his text up into many short paragraphs will not insist so on large type: a lavishly articulated page can be read rather easily.

By contrast, a text that flows out in an endless paragraph is very much less legible. The eye finds no place to stop or rest, the lines are easily 'lost track of.' To be read with pleasure (that is, without eye fatigue), such a text requires relatively large type that makes reading easy and allows one to stop anytime to savor the beauty of the sentences. [p115]

The insistence of the living author was for his work to appear in 'very large type.' The reality, after his death, would come to be thirty-nine lines cramped onto a small page.<sup>51</sup> As Kundera says, 'Ah, it's so easy to disobey a dead person.' [p276]

But whether or not we accept (I'm inclined to) Kundera's assertion that it is

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<sup>51</sup> The Penguin Modern Classics edition of *The Castle* that I have to hand (J.A. Underwood's translation) is not much better: the pages aren't particularly small, but they're still made to accommodate thirty-seven lines of, you'd have to say, pretty cramped type. I've never encountered an English edition of any of Kafka's work that had particularly large, generous type.

'justified, logical, serious, related to his aesthetic' for Kafka to want his prose set in large type, is Gray's formatting of his paragraphs a wish of that order – serious and related to his aesthetic? Regardless of Gray's intent,<sup>52</sup> is the result of the choice aesthetically meaningful? Or is it just the whim of a great man – in which case, if we notice it at all, we might greet it with an indulgent smile? Rodge Glass, writes in his biography of Gray, 'It seems Alasdair has reached "national treasure" status now, with most of his faults being indulged as the harmless eccentricities of an Old Master.' [p313] Perhaps Gray is enfolded in indulgent smiles. What would be the harm of one more?

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<sup>52</sup> Gray doesn't seem to consider the choice too worthy of critical dissection, or else presumably it would appear somewhere in all of the 'critic fuel' he routinely adds, in one way or another, to his books.



# THINKING IS A PAIN BECAUSE IT JOINS EVERYTHING TOGETHER

1982, *JANINE* IS A BOOK about control. Not just the imagined sadistic, sexual control by which McLeish's women are made to suffer, or the real, abusive control of the teacher Mad Hislop and his three-thonged belt, or the control exercised by social propriety (Jock and Helen go through with a wedding – and for years an unhappy marriage – because they can't bring themselves to return the presents [p295]), or political control, though that is present too: politics returns again and again to McLeish ('POLITICS WILL NOT LET ME ALONE. Everything I know, everything I am has been permitted or bugged up by some sort of political arrangement' [p221–2]), and it is also a book about the control of people by their government, and about the control of a small country by its larger, more powerful neighbour.

But beneath all these things, and supporting them, it is a book about self-control. On the second page the issue of McLeish's self-control appears. Here it is as a point of pride, enabling him to perform his job despite his alcoholism: 'I never stagger or stammer, self-control is perfect, the work is not affected.' [p2] The second chapter begins, after he has begun to set out his trap for Janine (the country club of dizzying wealth and stringent dress requirements for its women), 'This is splendid. I have never before enjoyed such perfect control.' [p18]

Throughout the dark night of the soul that is the novel, he will depend on that self-control, and it will fail him again and again.

His plans are as grand as his failures will be; he is attempting to construct a multi-stranded pornographic epic to entertain himself, shifting his attentions between the various objects of his lust, moving between their narratives, putting them into varied (and mounting) peril.

I will work like a historian describing in turn Germany Britain France Russia America China, showing depression and dread growing within each for domestic reasons, but distracted by challenges and threats from abroad until the heads of government move to their controls in the hidden bunkers, and make certain declarations, and then the tanks start rolling through the streets with evacuations, concentration camps, firestorms, frantic last-minute propaganda and the awful togetherness of total calamity before the last, huge, final bang. *That* is how a big piece of pornography should go. [p19]

The prolongment of this big piece of pornography is vital. Not just because McLeish wants the 'last, huge, final bang' to be as huge as it can be; in fact, he exists in dread rather than anticipation for the climax to come: 'I hate the *thing*, I hate orgasm, I'm lonely afterward.' [p19] He is fearful that it should reach a climax, because he is fearful of what his mind might turn to once the diversion is exhausted, how black and hopeless his mood might become. The goal is to have the thing in his grip, to be focussed on its production and delighted by its erotic potential (the shapes of women, the style of their clothes, the clicking of their unfastened studs, the desperateness of their situations) and to remain focussed on it *without the collapse of potential into release*.

So we are at odds with our narrator, because our appreciation of 1982, *Janine* depends on McLeish's loss of control. We don't want to read mere pornography (even diluted pornography<sup>53</sup>) but that (endlessly, without climax or distraction) is what McLeish wants to supply to himself. And though the pornographic reveries and their complicated set-ups have some inventiveness and narrative impulse (and though I won't pretend to know your tastes, or judge you for them: I'm happy to concede that differences in sensibility are possible here) there's not much sexual excitement to be had. (And even if there was: would we want our pornography to be constructed as if by a historian describing in turn Germany Britain France Russia, a pornographer inventing to fend off the loneliness of the climax, to avoid release, fearful that his story 'will inexorably turn into the usual dull old business'? [p314]) Rather, we look past

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<sup>53</sup> McLeish wonders, after a digression: 'Why am I diluting my enjoyable wicked fantasy with this sort of crap? – like a publisher attaching a brainy little essay by a French critic to *The Story of O* to make the porn-eaters think they are in first-class intellectual company.' [p15]

*Thinking is a pain because it joins everything together*

the fantasies in order to see McLeish – visible in them as manufacturer and intended audience. We're interested in Superb not just as an object of lust or a character in a drama, but for McLeish's compulsion to list 'IMPORTANT DIFFERENCES BETWEEN SUPERB AND MY FORMER WIFE' [p23]. We make connections between McLeish the sadistic fantasist and McLeish the schoolboy victim of a sadistic teacher (a bully with a warped conception of what manhood entails).

Happily for the reader, painfully for McLeish, he is the possessor of a 'dangerously fissile involuntary memory' [Eilon] and is unable to contain its reactions. So he is plagued by productive distractions from his great enterprise – the distractions of politics and of his past. And it is these distractions that collapse the barrier, that intrude with everything else – all the components of the fantasist's mind – into the fantasy, and so bring the novel into existence.

Thinking is a pain because it joins everything together until my mother father  
Mad Hislop Jane Russell mushroomcloud miniskirt tight jeans Janine dead friend  
Helen Superb Sontag editor sad lesbian police Big Momma and the whore under  
the bridge surround me [p56–7]

Thinking is a pain *because it joins everything together*: it reveals McLeish to us in all his parts and, as tumult, assaults McLeish with the reality of his existence. (In his metaphorical role as a historian of varied narratives, it is 'awful togetherness' that McLeish sees in the violent climax he wishes to postpone.) When Sontag, one of the women from McLeish's life (rather than from his imagination) asks him to reveal his sexual fantasies to her – 'Come, whisper to me, I cannot be shocked. What is it you would really enjoy?' [p31] – at first he doesn't answer, and when pursued would rather pretend to be a paedophile than answer honestly: 'I wanted to keep reality and fantasy firmly separate because surely that is the foundation of all sanity?' [p31] What McLeish aspires to is separation. Kept separate, he can enjoy the cruelty of his fantasies, but he has to protect them from the great wash of everything that he doesn't want to think about; if he fails they become just a small, polluted act, a tin's-worth of lurid paint thrown into colossal waves.

He has – to help preserve the separateness of his fantasies – the tactic of drink. He

reaches for an 'emergency bottle': 'Carefully pour glassful. Get in bed. Sip slowly. The parts of this mind are blissfully disconnecting, thoughts separating from memories, memories from fantasies. If I am lucky now nothing will float to my surface but delicious fragments.' [p59] He uses drink to stupefy thought, which would make connections and deny separateness:

Sip.

Take that you stupid stinking turd of intelligent conscience.

Sip. Sip. [p114]

He has also the tactic of self-censorship. To keep his ardour in check, to prevent it from overwhelming his self-control and dashing towards a release that he knows he wants to postpone indefinitely, he bowdlerises some of his descriptions. He describes Janine: 'plump hips and shoulders, big etcetera' [p4]; and Superb: 'a plain well-built woman with big etceteras.' [p23]

Georges Perec counsels: 'Don't say, don't write "etc". Make an effort to exhaust the subject, even if that seems grotesque, or pointless, or stupid. You still haven't looked at anything, you've merely picked out what you've long ago picked out.' [p50] McLeish says 'etcetera' for just this reason, he avoids the words because he can't really *look*, not too closely, without risking overexcitement, over-involvement.

And he censors his own miserable memories as he censors his too-exciting erotic imagination: 'forget her' functions as both a self-chastising tic when he thinks of Denny and, in places, as a stand-in for her name: 'When forget her and I were not lovemaking or asleep' [p48], 'The sweetest line in the world was the profile of forgethername's belly curving out' [p26], 'Three great pleasant things once happened to me, forget her and Helen and Sontag.' [p62] This is more necessary inattention.

At one point McLeish attempts another tactic of separation: 'To stop a mass dangerously overheating, divide it,' he declares, and lists his imaginary women individually, 'a cool catalogue of caged beauties for me to divide, rule, tattoo, massage and variously goad into ecstasies of shameless wantonness if I manage to keep the head.' [p143]<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Though an unwelcome censorship thwarts him here: God, whose interests more closely »

These are McLeish's attempts to keep between two extremes: he can't allow himself to think too much or everything will be found to connect and the fantasy will be lost. But he can't become too hotly engaged in his pornographic inventions, or they will spend themselves, and he will be left defenceless. He fails repeatedly and in both directions.

At one point he succumbs too completely to the temptations of the fantasy, and his bed lifts from the ground 'like a magic carpet' and carries him into it, carries him to Superb 'spread on her back like a starfish' but as he enters her he is also 'entering Jane Russell the editor Janine Sontag Big Momma Helen forget her forget' [p45]. The separation has collapsed: here comes everybody.

And he enters the 'slough of despond': 'HELL HELL HELL HELL HELL I lost control, I lost control.' [p46]

These two things then, I'm asking you to bear in mind when considering this novel of a lonely and broken man tickling himself into a wank (as an irate God puts it [p31]):

- That it is about control and the slippage of control, and constructed by the movement between these states: McLeish prides himself in his self-control, fears for his self-control, loses his self-control – this is how the book is animated.
- That this control is being exercised to keep things separate, and attendant on its failures is a collapse of that separation: the control that McLeish enjoys exercising over his imaginary women depends on the control he exercises over himself – when *that* fails, all his preoccupations (with all of their despair) are liable to converge upon him.

If we were to take any novel and re-set it, inserting a line-space between paragraphs, then the way we read that novel would change; it would inflect our reading. The effect might be subtle and the inflection small, our reading might bend without breaking,

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align with our own – wanting McLeish to face himself honestly and fully – prevents his thoughts of Helga, intruding on the text with an obliterating row of asterisks, erotic detail excised by the teeth of an editorial deity. (In 'Logopandocry' a similar outbreak of asterisks occur when, 'HERE A GREAT PART OF THE MANUSCRIPT HAS BEEN ATE BY MICE' [p175] and again at, 'MORE EXCISIONS HERE BY TOOTH OF EDITORIAL RODENTS' [p179]).

but the difference would be real – as a change in typeface is real and meaningful, even if it takes a particular sort of reader or a particularly ostentatious typeface for it to be consciously attended to. If we did it to the wrong writer (take me, for example, seeing as I'm available and on hand) the change might be clumsy and damaging (*Muscle* would be spattered with small moments, loose and graceless on the page).

The difference is in our almost musical sense of the breaks between paragraphs. Adorno's essay 'Punctuation Marks' is its own small hymn to how we sense this musicality in commas, semicolons, colons, etc.<sup>55</sup> and puts it well: 'There is no element in which language resembles music more than in the punctuation marks [...] only a person who can perceive the different weights of strong and weak phrasings in musical form can really feel the distinction between the comma and the semicolon.' [p300] I'd suggest we're capable of discerning a similar difference in strength between the paragraph break that uses a line space and the break that merely starts a new indented line.

Gray's paragraphs have an architectonic soundness, resembling the paragraphs of an essay rather than most fiction in their integrity. In a typical example from 1982, *Janine*, McLeish recalls of his friend Alan, in the final sentence of a paragraph, 'He had only one defect.' [p102] There follows quite an involved anecdote about the defect – what it was, and how McLeish discovered it. The anecdote is: McLeish (while a college student) returns home to find himself without his keys, and tries unsuccessfully to climb in through a window. He goes and gets Alan, and watches while his taller friend makes the climb. He is then kept waiting by the door. Finally let in, he finds Alan's appearance 'shocking', makes him a cup of tea and sits with him while he regains himself. 'Gradually his colour returned, he swallowed the tea, smiled and said, "Now you know that I'm afraid of heights."' [p103] Although the telling of it is compact, there is still plenty to this story that might, in the hands of another writer, have merited a number of paragraphs. In Gray, it is held together in one because it is all to a single purpose.

The novel is full of paragraphs that follow this structure – one paragraph concluding with the framing of a topic, the next exploring it, and so on. One paragraph ends, 'A war would do the trick. Scotland is wired for it,' [p124] and the next paragraph

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<sup>55</sup> As Perec wouldn't say.

considers how the installation into Scotland of the machinery of nuclear conflict has been managed, and how the country will continue to be managed after war arrives. In the last sentence of this paragraph, a parenthetical notes that ‘for three hundred years the British soldier has been spectacularly obedient’ [p124/5] and the next paragraph narrates this history of obedience. Even when the precursory topic sentence is absent, the rational demarcation of paragraphs dominates throughout *1982, Janine* and the whole corpus of Gray’s fiction.

If Gray is far from alone in considering his paragraphs in this way, using them to carefully measure out the structure of his text, there are definitely other, distinct uses that can be made of paragraph breaks.

In Father Paulus’s long discussion with Shay about the parts of the shoe, DeLillo presents the priest doing this:

He tilted his chin in high rebuke, mostly theatrical, and withdrew his body from the surface of the desk, dropping his bottom into the swivel chair and looking at me again and then doing a decisive quarter turn and raising his right leg sufficiently so that the foot, the shoe, was posted upright at the edge of the desk.

A plain black clerical shoe. [p540/1]

The shoe is given to us (and to Shay) separately, as an object of discrete contemplation, isolated in a new paragraph. The paragraph structure creates an emphasis in our reading and suggests the timing of the moment – a loaded pause in the lesson, as the shoe waits between the two men, its parts so far unnamed and (therefore) unseen.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> How a writer formats their paragraphs as they are writing is a separate issue to how they are formatted for publication, but it’s interesting to note that DeLillo, asked in the *Paris Review* in 1993, ‘Do you care about paragraphs?’ responded in a way that shows a presentational choice about paragraphing had a profound effect on his perception of his writing:

When I was working on *The Names* I devised a new method—new to me, anyway. When I finished a paragraph, even a three-line paragraph, I automatically went to a fresh page to start the new paragraph. No crowded pages. This enabled me to see a given set of sentences more clearly. It made rewriting easier and more effective. The white space on the page helped me concentrate more deeply on what I’d written.’ [Begley]

These two different models in the use of the paragraph (one in the service of structure, the other the management of pace and emphasis) reflect something about the difference between the Gray-paragraph and the conventional-paragraph, which is not just a matter of formatting but also of their logic. Gray's paragraphs *are flexible enough to accommodate dialogue*, whereas the paragraphs of other writers are not, because Gray has introduced a new (sub-paragraph, supra-sentence) point of articulation. He has created a graphic distinction between what is to be understood as a paragraph break (a line space) and what indicates a new speaker (beginning on a new line without an indent).

A writer (like DeLillo) whose text is already broken into paragraphs by dialogue, is perhaps less likely to look to the paragraph to provide structural coherence and more likely to consider the other ways in which the breaks between paragraphs can affect our reading (so, perhaps, using them to manage pace and emphasis).

Gray's paragraphs, on the other hand are invulnerable to dissolution by dialogue, so it makes sense that the paragraphs that Gray wants to be 'seen and read as separate units' have a corresponding rigour to their form – they contain whole episodes, they are complete thoughts. That integrity is performed and reinforced by the graphical convention Gray has adopted for them, which informs and reflects their structure – allowing them to exist discretely and honouring the larger unit by not allowing it to be broken up by speech.

A choice regarding paragraph breaks is particularly meaningful in the context of a book like *1982, Janine*. The novel depends on control and collapse – so the moment of passage between different paragraphs is crucial. If McLeish strays from pornographic reverie into contemplation of his life, then each time the reader encounters a paragraph break they encounter the possibility of another shift – the fantasy may reassert itself. In a typically formatted book a paragraph break would make that unlikely, because a shift of that order would merit some more definitive break, but because Gray's paragraph breaks are themselves more definitive, they resemble what would be section breaks in other books, and as such are capable of performing large changes of focus (the only breaks in *1982, Janine* are paragraph and chapter breaks), we can't be sure what we're going to get on the other side of any paragraph break. After thoughts of Alan, for example, McLeish takes advantage of the line-space – it becomes an opportunity for



the deliberate reassertion by McLeish of narrative control, and he pressed back into a fantasy we'd left twelve pages previously: 'So in the private viewing theatre Helga sits watching for a second time a film of her tallslenderhandsomelonghaired blonde self.' [p104] However, within a handful of lines he has lost the fantasy again and is thinking about Helen, the drift occurring *without* a paragraph break.

This play occurs throughout the book. The orderliness of the paragraphing accords to McLeish's efforts to keep his thoughts orderly and separate, and when he is asserting (or attempting to assert) his control of his narrative, the effort is enacted by the separating barriers of the paragraph breaks. However, when the breakdown of control occurs it happens not *on* but *around* the paragraph breaks, and the failure of transitions to conform to the paragraph breaks is an enactment of McLeish's loss of control. For example, people have a way of wandering into McLeish's thoughts.

"Keep talking like that," says Momma, giggling, "it's sexy. It suits you."

"You are absolutely wrong about lesbians," said Sontag, when I told her this bit, "we are not at all hard and cruel." [p34]

Until 'when I told her this bit' places it, Sontag's criticism is presented as if she is in conversation with the incredible lesbian, as if she was part of the scene rather than of its breakdown. Similarly, although he's been thinking of other things, McLeish greets a dead man mid-sentence as if has just wandered into the room, 'hello Alan.' [p129]

So it is that the carefully measured units of Gray's paragraphs correspond to the typographical reinforcement of their separateness, and that separation becomes, in 1982, *Janine*, a metaphor and tool of McLeish's control of his thoughts (and reinforces their collapse when it occurs). So, although it escapes much conscious comment or attention (it doesn't, after all, look 'queer'), we'd be wrong to greet it with a shrug, or a *de gustibus non est disputandum*, or an indulgent smile.

So it will be sad, when Gray is dead, how easy it will be for a publisher to begin to disobey him.

Except we don't need to wait to see Gray's work mistreated.

## A RESPITE, A QUIZ

A SHORT QUIZ. I THINK you can get this (easily, in fact – without strain, without sweat). Famous First Lines is our subject, and one of the best-known pieces of twentieth century literature.

What's the first line of *Lolita* by Vladimir Nabokov?

I think, maybe, with the kind of irresistible propulsive energy that sends a person leaping for the pencil at a pub quiz, you just thought, 'Lolita, light of my life, fire of my loins. My sin, my soul,' [p9] etc. right up to the tap on your teeth at three. Maybe not, maybe you're too well read, erudite and everything else to fall for the trick. Because, although I think you'd probably get the point in the pub quiz, and although that line begins Humbert Humbert's narrative of his doomed and awful love affair with Dolores Haze, it's not the opening line of the book. Humbert Humbert is preceded and introduced in a foreword by 'John Ray, Jr., Ph. D.' who supplies the book with its actual opening line.<sup>57</sup> But even though John Ray, Jr. is no less a character of Nabokov's creation than Humbert Humbert, his chapter, being preceded by the heading 'Foreword', seems to have acquired in popular consciousness some of the contingent, uncertain quality of the genuine, un-textualised paratext.<sup>58</sup> Though the fiction has begun it seems as though

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<sup>57</sup> It's distinctly less mellifluous – Ray is not a murderer, and perhaps accordingly his prose style is not as fine as Humbert's. The line is: "Lolita, or the Confession of a White Widowed Male," such were the two titles under which the writer of the present note received the strange pages it preambulates.' [p3]

<sup>58</sup> If you google for the first line of *Lolita*, therefore, Humbert's is what you'll get. 'That's the opening line of Vladimir Nabokov's groundbreaking nobel *Lolita*,' claim *NPR* in a celebration of the book's 50th anniversary. *Wikiquote* includes it in its collection of opening lines. Even Nabokov, reading from the book in a television documentary [viewable at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p3fsSL4Bw9w>] says: 'Of course, incredible as it may seem, perhaps not everybody remembers the way *Lolita* starts in English' and reads: 'Lolita, light of my life ...' Obviously Nabokov is not ignorant of John Ray, Jr., but implicitly seems to feel, like the rest of us seem to, that Ray's »

in some sense the novel has not, not until Humbert begins, not at 'Foreword,' not until 'PART ONE.'

Here's how precarious Ray's position is: not many years ago, Penguin were re-publishing Nabokov's entire backlist, and in the process of stripping from each book the editorial apparatus that had attached itself to previous editions, an editorial assistant took John Ray, Jr. at his word as an academic in good standing, and removed him. This *Lolita*, short an introducer, was published and available for months before a bookseller noticed the omission and made a blog post about it.<sup>59</sup> (I remember at the time someone joking that maybe Penguin would also publish *Pale Fire* without Charles Kinbote's accompanying notes.)

In the prelims the ground is loose underfoot – and if it gives way the drop is out of existence altogether.

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foreword exists on the outside edge of the text's membrane, and as a result can't quite be said to *count*, not really.

<sup>59</sup> 'Dear Penguin your lovely new *Lolita* has something missing,' by Jonathan Main. After Penguin heard about their mistake (I happened to be working at Penguin at the time and got to be the person who told the classics editor in charge of the new editions), they pulped the copies they could, repaired and reprinted. [See Page, 'Penguin pulps *Lolita* after axing fictional foreword']

## BODY TEXTS

ANY OF THE PARTS OF the book might be textualised by the author, the editorial apparatus perhaps most obviously. It is composed of words, so authors feel comfortable handling the material; as a result, fictive forewords and editors (like John Ray Jr.) abound, contesting and manipulating our understanding of the text – in *Don Quixote*, *The Castle of Otranto*, *The Book of Disquiet*, *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* and many others, while academics squabble in the footnotes of *The Third Policeman*. But other more visual/opaque/multimodal/transliterate/metatextual occupations of the paratext (depending on your choice of terminology) are just as possible: the manner of paragraphing,<sup>60</sup> the choice of typeface<sup>61</sup> or of the size at which it is reproduced,<sup>62</sup> whether and how the text is bound.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> In the case of Gray.

<sup>61</sup> Take Thackeray's *Henry Esmond*: Gennette bemoans the fact that the 'Queen Anne-style characters' in which it was originally set were abandoned for later editions. 'Those characters gave the book its "bewigged and tapestried" look and contributed greatly to its effect as pastiche. It must at least be admitted that two versions of the book exist: one in which the imitative intention is extended to the typographical (and orthographical) paratext, the other in which the imitative intention is limited to theme and style.' [*Paratexts*, p34]

<sup>62</sup> If we were interested in honouring Kafka's wishes.

<sup>63</sup> Saport's *Composition No. 1* (with its loose single pages) and *The Unfortunates* (with its separate sections, some single pages, some small pamphlets). But also: I have one great dissatisfaction with all recent editions of *Tristram Shandy* (at least all that I have encountered): they combine it into a single book.

Shandy notes in the middle of his fourth volume that he is a whole year older than when he began writing but still his narrative has reached 'no farther than to my first day's life' so, rather than advancing he is just 'thrown so many volumes back [...] it must follow, an' please your worships, that the more I write, the more I shall have to write – and consequently, the more your worships read, the more your worships will have to read.' [p257] This is the great joke of this novel of digressions, and also its great threat against the reader. And it is undermined when it is held in a single volume of maybe intimidating but certainly finite length. An ideal *Tristram Shandy* would have to come in separate volumes (individually smaller but better able to maintain the possibility of vast, even indefinite length).

But there are limits to the author's power. Authors all work, like Johnson, within the pocket and the patience of their publisher, and publishers are used to keeping authors confined to the text block, and retaining control over the rest of the book. The paratext exists at the border of the relationship between the reader and the text; it can also be a contested zone between the author and the publisher. Take Gass's example of Joyce's 'transliteracy', that he worries about the colour of the cover of *Ulysses*: it's not unusual for an author to have no control at all over the cover of their book.<sup>64</sup> Typically, for the sake of courtesy, a cover will be run past them, their complaints registered – a 'big' author might have the economic sway to encourage the publisher to bend to their wishes. But, normally, it is the publisher's decision whether to accommodate or ignore the author. To be transliterate is to claim a privilege that is not naturally assumed to fall to the author.

Even the title, on which so much can depend,<sup>65</sup> remains part of the paratext, and the publisher has plenty of reason to take particular interest in it. 'Through all the years that I carried this story around with me in my head, I never thought of giving it any other title than *Operation Anthropoid* (and if that's not the title you see on the cover, you will know that I gave in to the demands of my publisher, who didn't like it: too SF, too Robert Ludlum, apparently.' So writes Laurent Binet in *HHhH*. [Section 88]

One not unreasonable response to our question, 'if the body of the book speaks then why shouldn't the author care what it has to say?' would be that publishers should know their business. There is often, between text and publisher's paratext, a difference of audience. The title, for example, reaches not just readers of the book, but an almost certainly far larger audience of potential readers. Readers have already purchased or otherwise acquired the book and their immediate commercial interaction with the publisher is done. Potential readers, on the other hand: they might yet buy! There are pressing commercial considerations involved in how you address them, questions of how to situate the book as a product within a market ('too SF, too Robert Ludlum'). We've already talked about that mercantile baby seal, the blurb. The blurb attempts,

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<sup>64</sup> Or it has not been in the past; the practice is perhaps changing.

<sup>65</sup> Genette suggests this thought experiment: 'limited to the text alone and without a guiding set of principles, how would we read Joyce's *Ulysses* if it were not called *Ulysses*?' [Paratexts, p2]

above anything else, to convert the book browser into the book owner. Whatever aesthetic niceties it might (but often doesn't) possess, this is a fundamental difference between the text and much of the publisher's paratext: a difference of audience and of the relationship to that audience. The publisher's paratext is concerned with saying less interesting, more easily definable things to a larger audience in a more obsequious voice than is the text.<sup>66</sup>

Even beyond commercial concerns, publishers (used to doing things a certain way and disinclined to make things difficult for themselves or the reader) might resist an author's attempt to commandeer some element of the paratext, as we've seen with the publisher of *Lanark* who worried that Gray's paragraphs 'might look queer' and had to see them on the page to be convinced. Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves* is unimaginable without its typographic wildness – the strange positioning of type that mimics the strange, unreliable spaces of the house at the centre of its tale of horror – but according to Danielewski, 'the latter stages of getting *House of Leaves* ready for production involved such a great deal of work that Pantheon began to wonder if they were going to be able to publish it the way I wanted. So I wound up having to do the typesetting myself.' [McCaffery and Gregory, p118] Still, clearly, these things can be done, though authors might need to be their own publishers, they may need a capacity for things not typically within an author's purview. These obstacles are easier to overcome than they used to be – easier to learn InDesign than cast letterforms in metal; easier to send a PDF to a printer than run your own press – but to be Alasdair Gray, with his sense of the composition of the page is not a common thing and, at the very least, this meddling requires exertion. And it's a difficult exertion, complicated by technology (as much as it is eased by it in other ways)...

To come back to 1982, *Janine*, and to control: after the ministry of voices and McLeish's suicide attempt, we are given the story of his time in Edinburgh as part of a theatre

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<sup>66</sup> None of this is to say that a publisher might not, for commercial or other reasons, exert considerable influence on the text itself, but as the reader is someone who contends with the text (whatever Coren and Capote suppose), an author is only this: the party responsible for it. So it makes sense (it's tautological even) to speak as if the author holds ultimate responsibility for the text. (Even if there are real, living authors – as well as editors, publishing directors and others – who might quarrel with you for doing so.)

company. He is in charge of lighting a play, and through it he neglects Denny, who he loves, and meets Helen who he doesn't and will marry.

The director of the play announces that, as well as running the lights, McLeish will begin the play by going on stage and putting on his overalls in front of the audience. The running shoulder on the page of this announcement reads, 'I AM GIVEN A PART'. [p229] But there's a joke here: 'I AM GIVEN A PART' appears directly beside a sentence about a 'hairy art student' who the company have seen 'working in the cellar downstairs on a frieze of fabulous monsters round the restaurant wall'. [p227/8] Gray is, of course, a muralist as well as an author, and was already a muralist during his own time as an art student, when he produced decorations for student dances and balls; in *A Life in Pictures* he writes, 'the biggest decorative scheme was painted for the Art School Christmas fancy dress ball, when Malcolm [Hood, a friend of Gray's] and I suggested Monster Rally for a theme and carried it out in the assembly hall.' [p66] In photographs he poses alongside the lurid, fabulous monsters he has painted on the walls for the dance. So 'I AM GIVEN A PART' is made to refer to our narrator, but to our author as well, appearing in a cameo.

In the ebook of 1982, *Janine*, the joke is broken. All the running shoulders are broken, in fact. There is no way to account for them, not in an ebook format made for use across e-readers, phones, tablets, computers, a format which has not taken into consideration synoptic running shoulders as something that an author might creatively adopt as part of their text.<sup>67</sup> So they are pushed into the text and made into subheadings ('I AM GIVEN A PART' is separated from the art student, pushed in and down). They retain their page numbers though.

The result is that into this book, in which the careful control of paragraphs is so important, a new type of articulation is clumsily, chaotically introduced: numbered sections of roughly equal length.<sup>68</sup>

The ebook can't handle the novel's other typographic eccentricities either: the

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<sup>67</sup> The ebook that I am referring to is a Kindle edition, but I don't think I will be saying anything that wouldn't apply to any other ebook editions of 1982, *Janine* that might be available.

<sup>68</sup> There are all kinds of ways in which the new headings of the ebook are unfortunate, damaging things, but just one more example: as McLeish is remembering his dear, lost friend Alan, the running shoulders in the print edition forego their usual playfulness, and instead simply, reverentially repeat the name, page after page – ALAN, ALAN ALAN [p97–103]. In the ebook, you can imagine: redundant, awkwardly placed, intrusive subheadings sprout tactlessly.

inverted capital Ys just vanish (leaving horizontal space where they should appear), and the complicated layouts of the ministry of voices, beyond the capacity of the ebook to manage them as type, are reproduced as images, which neither match the formatting of the text around them, nor take into account the size of screen on which they are being viewed.

I'm not delighting in any of this; I'm not sneering. I'm not Giles Coren, pleased to hear that the cutting of the holes in *Albert Angelo* has caused difficulty. Again: I denounce his snobbery, his small-minded, pitiable self-satisfaction. In fact, these compromises, these little acts of vandalism against a novel I care about bother me deeply.

But I can also sympathise with the vandal, the responsible party. They were given an impossible task – it is a novel conceived for print, and I don't know if there could be a response to the challenge of making it an ebook that could be much better than the deeply unsatisfying response they provided.<sup>69</sup>

There is a strange cleaving pressure that exists at the moment. Willie van Peer suggests that what he calls 'typographic foregrounding' (deviation from standard habits of presenting text on the page<sup>70</sup>) occurs unevenly over time, and offers as a hypothesis for this unevenness fluctuations in 'the tension between the text and the specific medium in which it is produced.'

It is striking that the periods in which such typographical experiments are popular, are also periods in which marked shifts occur with respect to the medium of communication. In Greek antiquity we observe the transition from a largely oral culture to one in which a considerable part of the population is literate [...] In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries we see the replacement of handwritten manuscripts by the explosive use of the printing press. Finally, at the end of the nineteenth century there is again a significant expansion of literacy in the general

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<sup>69</sup> At least an ebook for the market – meant to be sold through iBooks and Amazon and to work across different devices. If you were able to control the page size there is nothing to stop 1982, *Janine* from being adequately reproduced on screen (a simple PDF could do it pretty well).

<sup>70</sup> In an article particularly concerned with poetry, which has always been a particular locus of typographic foregrounding, as we'll hear Barthes comment presently.



population. [...] Furthermore, we witness at this time a rapid diffusion of new media. [...] If the present explanation has any validity, then one should expect in the near future, related to the growth in the use of personal computers, as well as the increasing accessibility and sophistication of photocopying techniques, a new boom in typographic foregrounding. [p58/9]

(Van Peer was writing in 1993, and there does seem to have been a boom, I think you would have to say.)

Shifts that affect the medium or the public's relationship to it make us more conscious that the carrier of the text is not a natural, inevitable object, but a package of conventions, which can be usurped and manipulated. In these periods the body of the work is more liable to exploitation, to being foregrounded, until convention is able to rehabilitate it, as Michael Kaufmann describes: 'What we witness in the eighteenth century use of the physical text in the novel [...] is the gradual naturalization of the voice to the printed page. Readers began to internalize the conventions of print – the neat printed blocks of right-justified type, nicely numbered, replete with running heads – so the rift opened between print and the voice appeared healed.' [p26]

Contemporary writers, as well as existing in a period of change in which the medium has become more visible (moving from the shadows of our inattention), have also gained access to the tools necessary to occupy the paratext of the work. It is only natural that there are those among them that have attempted it: 'In the game of life,' William Gass writes, 'it may be that opportunities are best avoided, or politely declined, so that we can hold on more tightly to what we have, but in the serious business of art, opportunities are enemies unless seized.' [*Tropes of the Text*, p157] New opportunities have arisen, and in poetry and fiction, by small presses and large, they have been seized.

But as well as and in direct opposition to the attractive force of these new possibilities, there is another technologically motivated pressure exerting itself on writers. The book hasn't simply transformed, enriched by the possibilities of new technology; it has divided. New possibilities exist for authors if they want to write specifically for the page, new possibilities exist if they want to write specifically for the screen, but the possibilities of the two are distinct, and writers split their audience if they choose one at the expense of the other. Publishers are likely to want to sell a book

both as an ebook (and an ebook that can be viewed across different devices, inherently limiting the possibilities for formal exploration) and as a print book. Something as simple as running shoulders can be disruptive to their ability to do so.

So on the one hand, exciting new possibilities appear to writers, gifted them by technology. Frances Burney, in the preface to *Evelina*, describes her veneration for the writers that have preceded her ('the knowledge of Johnson, [...] the eloquence of Rousseau, [...] the pathetic powers of Richardson, [...] the wit of Fielding, and humour of Smollet') but, she says, 'I yet presume not to attempt pursuing the same ground which they have tracked; whence, though they may have cleared the weeds, they have also culled the flowers, and though they have rendered the path plain, they have left it barren.' [p8/9]

And what great, untrodden grounds open to us now! Interactive fictions, fictions that incorporate sounds, or video, that track the movement of readers or the flow of blood through their veins, fictions that appear in infinite variations, each copy of a book different from the last, books that evolve or collapse over time... But, on the other hand, it has never made better sense for the writer to disregard the form of the work, and produce something that can be borne from one vessel into the other without suffering any essential disturbance – because the work is likely to have multiple simultaneous existences, each of which it must be able to accommodate.

In *Janine's* 'Epilogue for the discerning critic,' Gray lists (beside the running shoulder, 'THANKS') all the many people involved in crafting his tricky, unconventional novel:

Flo Allen typed all perfectly with help from Scott Pearson in the denser pages of chapter 11. Ian Craig, the art director, Judy Linard the design, Jane Hill the editor, Bunge, Will, Phil and Tom the typesetters, Peva Keane the proofreader, worked uncommonly hard to make this book exactly as it should be. [p335]

It takes work to make any book; it takes uncommon and uncommonly hard work to make a book like 1982, *Janine*. Any author who moves beyond the habitat of the text block makes demands. They risk trying the patience of their publisher, and require extra work and care of people – typesetters, designers, printers, booksellers – who might not

appreciate the trouble. They may also try the patience of the reader if the reader is of the sort inclined toward convention and liable to find it tiresome when convention is upset. They are being rude twice: once to make the work and again when they subject the reader to it.

Barthes: 'any upset an author imposes on the typographic norms of a work constitutes an essential disturbance' [*Literature and Discontinuity*, p172],<sup>71</sup> and such upsets, he says, are generally tolerated only in poetry. ('We recognize here a technique familiar to good society: to freeze such liberties as if they were an ulcer; consequently, aside from poetry, no outrage to the Book may be tolerated.' [p172]). He writes:

In a literature like ours where everything is in its place, and where only such an order generates security, morality, or more exactly, for it consists of a complex mixture of both, hygiene, it is poetry and poetry alone whose function is to collect all the phenomena subversive of the Book's material nature [...] [p172]

The word 'hygiene' is well chosen. Authors of this kind of work are making an admission about their art that other writers, and readers who wish to consider only the pure text, implicitly deny: that the book possesses a body. And around the body of the book, as around our own bodies, exist social rituals and decorums. The established conventions of typography and presentation work to let the physical reality of the book fade from our awareness; good hygiene lets us mask our bodies from each other and from ourselves.

The choice of the writer is to deny the body of the book, which is dishonest, a dereliction and a squandering, or to write in flesh, which can bruise and age and rot. These – *Albert Angelo*, *Mobile*, *1982*, *Janine*, *Hopscotch*, *House of Leaves*, *Woman's World*... – are body texts. In the case of *1982*, *Janine*, we can see how the care that has been taken over the body of the work – the precise typesetting, the hard work of Gray (and Ian Craig, Judy Linard, Jane Hill, Bunge, Will, Phil, Tom and Peva Kane) to get it just so (work which made it the book it is, and which we'd be smirking philistines to dismiss) – is vulnerable to decay as soon as an attempt is made to transpose it. It may be easy to

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<sup>71</sup> We could include, too, non-typographic interferences in common habits of production or design.

disobey a dead author; it is impossibly hard to obey the author of a body text when the body has to be shed, as it is in the transfer from a print book to an ebook.

And the same is true of the inverse: pieces of electronic literature that depend on the capacities of the screen and the computer, and which could not be transposed into print: these are also body texts, and are also prone to decay, perhaps even more profoundly. A print body text might be preserved on a shelf; digital creations are not always so easily protected.

One of the critical programs in the development of electronic literature is the pre-Web hypertext editor Storyspace (which publicly appeared in 1987 – Tim Berners-Lee’s proposal that would become the basis for the World Wide Web was written in 1989). In almost any discussion of electronic literature, and particularly literary hypertext fiction, Storyspace texts recur – namely Michael Joyce’s *afternoon, a story* (always), Shelley Jackson’s *Patchwork Girl* and Stuart Moulthrop’s *Victory Garden* (usually). Storyspace is unusual among hypertext editing programs for having been updated for as long as it has,<sup>72</sup> but of this widely-acknowledged canon, *afternoon* and *Victory Garden* are available just as CD-ROMs (CD-ROM drives becoming less common all the time) and, according to Eastgate, the publisher, are made to run on Mac OS X 10.3–10.6 and Windows XP–Windows 7 (which is to say, in the case of Mac, currently four iterations of the operating system out of date, and, in the case of Windows, two). *Patchwork Girl* is more up-to-date (coming on USB-stick and built to work on Yosemite, the current version of Mac OS X<sup>73</sup>), but obsolescence impatiently awaits it too, the moment the publisher’s back is turned.

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<sup>72</sup> Belinda Barnet, in her usefully thorough 2012 telling of the history of Storyspace:  
Pieces of editing software, particularly hypertext systems, are not known for their shelf life. None of the first-generation hypertext systems from the 60’s and 70’s have survived into the modern era. Even what is called the ‘second generation of hypertext systems from the late 70’ and early 80’s, the contemporaries of Storyspace – FRESS, Intermedia, Smith’s WE, Apple’s Hypercard – are no longer in use. Storyspace, however, has survived for almost thirty years; content is still being written for it, it [*sic*] still being bought and sold, and it is still being used in pedagogic environments, although the user base is probably fairly small (a couple of hundred users). This is virtually unheard of in the history of computing software; systems just don’t last that long. The reason Storyspace has survived is fairly simple: Eastgate Systems has been maintaining it.

<sup>73</sup> Details for all three stories can be found through <http://www.eastgate.com/catalog/Fiction.html>.

A report on the challenges of digital preservation (sponsored by the Library of Congress and the National Science Foundation in the US) summarises the issue: 'Digital objects require constant and perpetual maintenance, and they depend on elaborate systems of hardware, software, data and information models, and standards that are upgraded or replaced every few years.' [page viii] It is not sufficient simply to preserve whatever data files constitute the work (in the case of electronic literature); it is also necessary to preserve the hardware and software that translates it for us (in the useful etymological sense of translate: to bear across). The mediation of electronic literature is not, as in the case of the printed work, a process completed at the beginning of the work's lifespan (so, as things have traditionally been: a book is produced which we can, without assistance, access quite comfortably at any time subsequent to its production until the glue comes unstuck and the ink fades), but occurs simultaneously with the moment of the reading. We need access to the work itself *and* to the mediating software and hardware on which it depends. And still that might not be sufficient, depending on our goal in preserving it: if we want to make the work available to a general audience, it's not enough that the necessary setup is in the storeroom of a library waiting to be booted up, it needs to be recreated, born anew, into a form that plays well with generally available technology (which may well be a much more laborious process than is the production of a new edition of a book). 'With a foreshortened canon limited to a few years and without the opportunity to build the kinds of traditions associated with print literature,' writes Katherine Hayles, 'electronic literature risks being doomed to the realm of ephemera, severely hampered in its development and the influence it can wield.' [p39/40]

What is required is nothing less than constant vigilance, a tremendous effort to resist the atrophy of the body.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> The Electronic Literature Organization, as part of its efforts in the Preservation, Archiving and Dissemination (PAD) of electronic literature, commissioned 'Acid-Free Bits' by Nick Montfort and Noah Wardrip-Fruin, which aims to encourage authors of electronic literature to think from the outset about how their work can be archived and preserved, and to give them advice on best practice for doing so: <http://www.eliterature.org/pad/afb.html>.

## COMING TOWARD A CONCLUSION

THE ‘TRANSLITERATE’ WILLIAM H. GASS I’ve already mentioned – his *Willie Masters’ Lonesome Wife* is a body text in the most absolutely overt way. A naked woman, who it seems reasonable to assume is our narrator, appears on the front cover, the title written across her chest (her bottom covers the book’s own rear end), and she maintains that there is no distinction between her and the text – ‘When a letter comes, if you follow me, there is no author fastened to it like a stamp; the words which speak, they are the body of the speaker. It’s just the same with me. These words are all I am.’ [p57]<sup>75</sup> – so her body and the body of the book are identical.

We know she has sex with many men: she is having sex with one of them for most of the course of the narrative (‘Phil he said his name was ... Was he? They were always Phil.’ [p2]), sex which ends unfulfillingly (‘it was a hollow victory, hollowing him’ [p54]) as she thinks our own engagement with her must (‘Really, did you read this far? puzzle your head? turn the pages this way and that, around about [...] But, honestly, you skipped a lot. Is that any way to make love to a lady’ [p52]). She is interrupted at one point by a page from a bodice-ripper (page 121 of *Passions of a Stableboy* has made its way onto her page 21). She discusses our inconstant, irrational revulsion at the body (‘If you have an experimental twist, try this: expectorate into a glass—sufficiently—twelve times

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<sup>75</sup> The book itself makes no use of page numbers, so those I give are being counted from the beginning of the narrative. Kaufmann, in *Textual Bodies*, deals with this same problem in the same way, except for one slight difference. The book opens with a double page spread: on the left hand side of which is another photograph of the woman, and on the right side the text begins; she is leaning across the gutter, and holding in her hand an ‘S’, the drop cap of the first word, as though she intends to eat it. Kaufmann, despite the demands of the character (and the book – the two being inseparable) that her/its physical existence not be denied, starts his page counting on the recto, with the beginning of the text, not on the verso with the photograph, which seems rude, deligitimising, to cut her off like that at the jawline, so I’ve started with the verso.

should do it. Do not tarry. Drink the spittle. Analyze your reluctance.' [p3]). She has appeared on the stage, in bawdy comedies. At one point we are given a skit in which she used to perform: a man and his wife (he can't remember her name except by 'peering between the bald knobs of her knees' [p24]) are sitting at breakfast when, to the man's horror, he finds a penis, much like his own, baked into his morning bread. The script for this strange scene is heavily annotated – digressions and commentary appear and then overwhelm it in footnotes, each of them marked with a growing series of asterisks (so, to begin with, \* then \*\* then \*\*\* and so on to \*\*\*\*\* and beyond). Very quickly the footnotes don't appear on the same page as their references, and it's hard to keep track of which one belongs to which marker, and the reader becomes disoriented, lost, and then, towards the bottom of a page, is accosted. The type turns bold, and the voice vicious:

**Now that I've got you alone down here, you bastard, don't think I'm letting you get away easily, no sir, not you brother, anyway, how do you think you're going to get out, down here where it's dark and oily like an alley, meaningless as Plato's cave? do you think you know the way? [p18]**

This is an enactment of the hostility of the body text. The reader is led astray by the rejection of convention – by a disregard for good typographic practice<sup>76</sup> – and into a bodily assault.

And yet there are writers, and maybe I'm among them, who aspire to such rudeness, who would gladly make trouble for their readers and work for their co-conspirators, writers who exercise an apparently contemptuous disregard for those who like books to be in good hygienic denial of the body, the visual odour of formal experimentation sponged from existence.

These writers are not in the majority. The body text, though it has an extremely long history, though it has seen periods of greater as well as lesser prevalence, remains something of a fringe practice (a fringe of a fringe, on the far edge of the already

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<sup>76</sup> And don't you feel soothed by the neat superscript numbers of my footnoting? If I expected only one note a page I might use \*, or, if slightly more, convention provides an order: \*, †, ‡, §. (things are getting out of hand now) ||. (never happens, can't remember seeing it) ¶.

### *Coming toward a conclusion*

marginal activity of serious writing and reading). Convention eases the work of writer and of the reader, and to dispense with it, to disrupt the liturgy of the High Mass and profanely insist on the flesh is to dispense with ease. But, while ease is popular, ease is not the goal of art.

The distinction is one Barthes makes in *The Pleasure of the Text*:

Text of pleasure: the text that contents, fills, grants euphoria; the text that comes from culture and does not break with it, is linked to a *comfortable* practice of reading. Text of bliss: the text that imposes a state of loss, the text that discomforts (perhaps to the point of a certain boredom), unsettles the reader's historical, cultural, psychological assumptions, the consistency of his tastes, values, memories, brings to a crisis his relationship with language. [p14]

The body text unsettles the reader's assumptions and does so not in rejection of art, but as part of the great effort of art. Shklovsky, who called *Tristram Shandy* 'the most typical novel in world literature' [*Sterne's Tristram Shandy: Stylistic Commentary*, p57], because of its undressing of convention, wrote that: 'Habitualization devours works, clothes, furniture, one's wife, and the fear of war.' [*Art as Technique*, p12]. Habitualization devours the book too. If, as Shklovsky put it, 'art removes objects from the automatism of perception' [*Art as Technique*, p13] it works by what he and the Russian formalists called defamiliarisation – the disruption of habit, the presenting of the commonplace in such a way that it appears to us strange, and so emerges from the great habitual *etcetera* that is day-to-day perception. Difficulty, awkwardness (the rudeness with which the body text disrupts readers, or leads them into a back alley assault) is not a failure of art but part of its process. Let it begin with the book itself and proceed from there.

The monomodal work, the work that aspires to be considered as pure text, is also linked to a 'comfortable practice of reading'. It is produced in defiance of its true nature, it hygienically denies the body (which it nevertheless can't transcend), and it deceives readers in order to soothe them.

In fact, Barthes's 'bliss' is an embodied term: the French word that Richard Miller, Barthes's translator, renders as 'bliss' is *jouissance*: in contrast to the text of pleasure (*jouir*), which is comfortable and does not disturb, the text of bliss, *jouissance*, includes within



### *Coming toward a conclusion*

it 'coming'. It carries the sexual, physical delight of the body at its most urgent and traumatic: 'shock, disturbance, even loss which are proper to ecstasy, to bliss.' [*The Pleasure of the Text*, p19] The monomodal and the body text: hygiene, which is the refutation of the body, and sexual pleasure, which is its indulgence. The body text is invested with the particularly human flaws of the body (it can wither; it can offend), but so too does it contain the possibility of the pleasures of the body, because the body has pleasures as well as filth and decay.

# SOLIPSISM

I'VE TYPESET BOOKS: IT WAS, at my first real job (as an Editorial and Production Assistant at a small Edinburgh publisher), one of many duties which ran pleasingly across almost every aspect of publishing, and typesetting was one of those that I found pleased me most. The arrangement of the grid, the choice of typeface, the single click that floods text into empty space, instantly summoning and instantly filling digital thumbnail pages by their hundreds – it is, at its centre, uncomplicated work, neatly ordered and gratifying.

Like other design work, it's work that I enjoy while realising I have no particular talent for it. I am not a great designer, I am a footler in design with decent enough taste to know it; I can, in my best moments, hope to pass as adequate. Still, I'm glad to hold in my head a clear idea of how it (this sentence, this paragraph, page, thesis) is going to look when I finally lay it out in InDesign. I need the format to be unexotic and respectable, but want the details carefully considered (an embarrassing admission, aspirations to elegance). I was glad when I found the typeface – ITC Golden Cockerel, based on type designed by Eric Gill for the Golden Cockerel Press – and glad when I decided that the inline references should be in a spot colour – to make it easier for the eye to pass over them without pulling the reader from the flow of the text.

This isn't writing: it exists somewhere between craft and procrastination. But thinking about the page (informed both by some familiarity with production, its tools and opportunities, and with a, presumably entwined, appreciation for those body texts I've written about here and others like them) has affected my creative work, and lead to ideas and decisions that are inseparable from the text.

In the novel, *Muscle*, that constitutes the greatest part of this thesis, the central conceit is that a minor, stock character from a hardboiled detective story (a hired thug, a goon, some dumb muscle) is made our focus and our narrator, and is discontented

with the limits on his agency, which are literary and generic but share enough, share plenty, with the limits on all of us – limits which are more absolute and deterministic, if we are honest with ourselves, than any requirement of plot. It makes sense for these metafictional pursuits to exist with the ‘metatextual’, to go back to Kaufmann’s term<sup>77</sup> for work that forces us ‘to see that the book is composed of print and paper constructed according to established conventions: our attention must be drawn to the materiality of the book by the manipulation of its body.’ [p15] In *Tristram Shandy* (with its allusions and self-referentiality as well as formal play) they exist together, metafiction and metatext: *Shandy*’s black page makes us see ink, while words made of the same stuff can try and distract us like a pointing finger. ‘Robert Alter calls *Tristram Shandy* the first novel about the crisis of the novel; I would call it the first novel about the crisis of print,’ says Kaufmann. [p26] These two crises drive the reader in the same direction: outward from the text, to an analytical, critical perspective (which is not to say an unaesthetic perspective, or an unengaged perspective, just one that demands interrogation of what is encountered).

In *Muscle*, the intrusion of the body of work comes, for example, with the interposition of pages from *The Gold Mask Killers*,<sup>78</sup> in which the understanding of the reader is guided by the change in typesetting. There is also the naming of one of the main characters ‘\_\_\_\_\_’ (without even the token phonetic balm of an initial), which is a minor aggression I feel no compunction about committing, though we’ll see if any publisher feels similarly antisocial. Hugh Kenner writes of the footnote that it introduces a structure to the text that is completely alien to the voice and incompatible with it:

The footnote’s relation to the passage from which it depends is established wholly by visual and typographic means, and will typically defeat all efforts of the speaking voice to clarify it without visual aid. Parentheses, like commas, tell the voice what to do: *an asterisk tells the voice it can do nothing*. [My emphasis.] You cannot read a passage of prose aloud, interpolating the footnotes, and

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<sup>77</sup> More terminological hopscotch – I thought I had landed, finally.

<sup>78</sup> Though the title of this Mike Swagger adventure isn’t explicitly given.

make the subordination of the footnotes clear [A footnote is inserted here: 'And they are often less subordinated than counterpointed.'].] and keep the whole sounding natural. The language has forsaken a vocal milieu, and a context of oral communication between persons, and commenced to take advantage of the expressive possibilities of technological space. [p39/40]<sup>79</sup>

Like the asterisk, each time the reader encounters \_\_\_\_\_ (and it happens constantly, on almost every page) they reach an obstacle to the voice and a reassertion of the body of the text.

The novel as it exists now is still just a schema for the final work, which, it seems to me, comes into existence<sup>80</sup> not just with the text but with the peritext. May whatever demands I feel obliged to make as a result of this way of thinking (for example, it feels relatively important to me – it being a loaded question in the book who is permitted access to speech – that the dialogue is given the typographic heft of double rather than single quotation marks) be indulged as harmless eccentricities.

It's a way of thinking that has led me to want to learn other skills that can be useful (and might potentially be subverted) in the production of a creative text. So, as well as typesetting, I've learned and practised some bookbinding. I've experimented with interactive fiction tools like Twine [<http://twinery.org>] (a sort of successor to Storyspace); however, implicit in the use of tools of that sort there seems to me an analogue to the broader oppositional pressures of working in body texts. As I've argued already, while the rise of new media brings new opportunities for authors, it also creates

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<sup>79</sup> A counterpoint: in the audiobook of *Consider the Lobster* by David Foster Wallace (who teems with footnotes), footnotes are given in a distorted, tinny voice – as if they have been played through an old answering machine – in an attempt to expand (or further exploit) the technological space of the recording to do justice to that of the page. (It's occurred to me that in an audiobook for *Tristram Shandy*, in the absence of the black page, a minute's silence should be held for the parson Yorick.)

Interestingly, both Kenner and Wallace talk of the footnote as providing access to a second voice: Kenner says 'the man who composes a footnote, and sends it to the printer along with his text, has discovered among the devices of printed text [...] a way of speaking in two voices at once' [p40]; while Wallace apparently once remarked that he liked footnotes and endnotes because they are 'almost like having a second voice in your head' [D.T. Max]. The writer who annotates is a chorus.

<sup>80</sup> Or doesn't, as it may yet be.

an expectation that texts will exist across platforms – and therefore a new conservative force that discourages experimentation with form on the page or the screen. Tools like Twine might make it easier for the author to write electronic literature, and might create conventions that ease the work of the reader, but they contain an implicit model of the sort of fiction they are designed to create: again, ease is offset against creative freedom.

In the case of Twine, which like Storyspace, presents to the reader sections of text – ‘lexia’ they’re sometimes referred to in interactive fiction circles<sup>81</sup> – with embedded links which allow the reader to progress more or less linearly through other lexia, it is not an unduly restrictive model, but it’s also not one I find particularly interesting. There seems, beyond the prefab models of digital literature, work worth doing, where the path is not yet plain, and the flowers are not yet culled. So I already knew some HTML and CSS (the primary languages used for making web pages) and I’ve attempted to teach myself (the programming language) JavaScript and (the JavaScript library) jQuery, which make it possible to do a lot of the text manipulation that appeals to me in writing made to exist on the screen.

The digital short story ‘The Brain Drawing the Bullet’ (included as part of this thesis<sup>82</sup>) is meant to interfere with a reader’s presumption of the stability of the text. As they proceed through the story, the parts of the narrative that they have already read are manipulated – particularly, the language of the shooting begins to bleed outwards, and both the narrator’s self-justification and the narrative itself begin to collapse. In order for this to work, there’s a balance that has to be maintained – readers should not immediately notice that the story is changing around them (they need to be lulled for a while) but they should, ideally, have seen what is happening by the end (some readers might miss it, but if all do then what’s the point?). The process of writing the story was unlike more conventional writing in that it turned early readers into something like playtesters: for example, I shared an early version with a workshop group and someone mentioned that they found it annoying not to have any indication of how long the story they were reading would be. This is an aspect of the physical text I think we rarely

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<sup>81</sup> For an interesting discussion of lexia, see Emma Lister’s ‘The Limits and Powers of the Technological Text’, beginning at p103.

<sup>82</sup> It might make sense, here, to go and read it – turn to [page 272](#) – before returning to this point in the dissertation.

consider – we always have an immediate awareness (both visual and tactile) of the length of any story or book we read (and, as a consequence, an ending can never sneak up on us as it could in a film, say). The status bar that has attached itself to ebooks is an effort to replicate this awareness, but it is not a necessary part of digital writing. In ‘The Brain Drawing the Bullet’, though, I did want, if I could, to provide the reader with a some indication of length, so I changed the design slightly: previously, as each section loaded, the web page would grow in height to accommodate it as necessary; I changed it so that the page began at its full height, so the reader is given a contextual clue as to how much story will appear.

Also, without giving the story to readers for feedback, I would never have appreciated how narrow and intense is the focus of people as they read. In an early version of the story I had worked hard to obscure the changes to the text – they happened off-screen, or simultaneous with the automated movement with which the story scrolls to the start of a new section – because I thought that as soon as they began to occur on the visible part of the screen, the reader would instantly notice (after all, knowing to look, the changes seemed outrageously blatant). The first workshop generally responded well to the story, they liked it; none of them, not one, spotted any of the trickery that was taking place around them.<sup>83</sup> Reworking the story was a process of making the changes more overt than I would have ever have been comfortable with if I had I not seen what you can get away with when people are focussed on reading.

While electronic literature often seems an attempt to reduce the role of the text and make the work more film-like or more game-like, ‘The Brain Drawing the Bullet’ is an attempt to remain with the text, but consider and exploit the difference between text as it exists on the screen and as it exists on the page. We are used to thinking of text as reliable, stable, but it no longer has to be – the reader who rests on the digital text as on something solid should be prepared for a lurch if it decides to abandon them.

I made an experiment years ago, called *Detainee 063*, in which it was not the instability of the digital text that I tried to exploit, but another aspect of the control we have over its existence across time. *Detainee 063* was a web site that republished the

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<sup>83</sup> One member of the group revealed that he disliked reading on the screen so he had clicked to open the story in its entirety, then copy and pasted it into Word, and printed it out.

Guantanamo Bay interrogation log of Mohammed Al-Qahtani. Al-Qahtani (a Saudi citizen who made a failed August 2001 attempt to enter the US, and has been referred to as the ‘20th hijacker’) was captured in Afghanistan in December 2001, and moved in 2002 to Guantanamo. The leaked interrogation log<sup>84</sup> covers the period from 23 November 2002 – 11 January 2003, during which time Al-Qahtani was questioned at Camp X-Ray.

There is a great deal in the log that is shocking – Al-Qahtani is repeatedly given IV drips to keep him healthy enough for the torture to continue, and on one occasion bites through it; he is made to act like a dog; images of victims of 9/11 are taped to his clothes; he is prohibited from praying; he is made to pray to Osama Bin Laden; his hands and feet swell; his heart rate drops to 35bpm – it is almost impossible to attend to all that is grotesque and reprehensible in the log, but one thing in particular I thought I could help to convey. Torture, at the time I made the site, in popular consciousness and discussion, had become practically synonymous with waterboarding, which is a large, graspable offence – something that can be described in a sentence, that can be replicated in a safe environment with Christopher Hitchens in the role of the victim so he can describe the sensation to readers [*‘Believe Me, It’s Torture’*]. It also fits into a notion of torture that is constant in dramatic representations in film and on television, the ‘ticking time-bomb’ scenario, in which vital information must be extracted quickly from a villain in order to save lives: waterboarding as a byword for torture doesn’t need to conflict with that utterly fantastical image of torture and its utility, and, in this way, while it is itself detestable, it is also a convenient public notion of torture (convenient for the perpetrators).

The interrogation log of Al-Qahtani documents a very different kind of torture, one that works by accretion and is incompatible with that dangerous myth: the mistreatment is not always severe, but it *is* relentless. The log lasts for fifty days, and throughout that time, teams of interrogators operating in shifts work on Al-Qahtani for twenty hours, allow him to rest for four, and then wake him up to begin again.

The site republished the log of the interrogation *in real time*, so that each entry appeared (and was published out to a Twitter feed) at the minute it had been recorded

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<sup>84</sup> In 2005, *Time* magazine published a report on Al-Qahtani based on the log [Zagorin and Duffy] and in 2006, they published it in full to their website [United States of America military, *Secret ORCON: Interrogation Log Detainee 063*].

seven years earlier.<sup>85</sup> In this way it followed Al-Qahtani through his twenty-hour days, rested with him for four hours and then woke up and continued. It was a *re-enactment*, and captured something about his torture that can elude descriptions or extracts – a meaning that resides in its awful duration. It was a re-enactment that was possible because the digital environment allowed me to control the rate of publication – more than any print republication I can imagine, it allowed me to convey something about what that kind of torture, what that erosion of a person is.

In quite a different example of the mutability of the digital text, I made a website in which words are buried within words:<sup>86</sup> it begins with a few short sentences, several words of which are underlined; if the reader clicks (or taps) on any of the underlined words, more text is revealed, in such a way that each version you expose is by itself grammatical and meaningful (so ‘complete’) but contains within itself the possibility of more (more text, more information, more narrative).<sup>87</sup> So for example, the first word of the page is ‘Hello.’ Clicking it reveals, ‘Hello. How are you doing?’ Click ‘doing’ and you get, ‘Hello. How are you doing? We never hang out any more.’ As it grows what begins as something of a joke (an impersonal address to an unknown audience becomes impossibly familiar and intimate) continues into a short story about a friendship (perhaps more than a friendship) gone adrift. The other sentences grow into information about me (the nominal purpose of the website), although another story I wrote is also buried deep in there, in service of my goal that the end result should be as harrowingly prolix

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<sup>85</sup> Seven years when the site first ran in 2009/10 – it ran again the following year.

<sup>86</sup> The site is called *Greater Than Or Equal To*. In the past year, an advertising agency made themselves a site similar enough to mine that several people accused them of plagiarism: I published an account of this episode, ‘I Have a Website That Buries Words within Words.’

<sup>87</sup> The code required to do this is incredibly simple, at least in the sense that a single JavaScript function of seven lines manages all the switching on and off of text and links. It becomes slightly more complicated when you begin to write text and control the manner of its appearance, as each link needs to identify a ‘span’ (or spans) that will appear when the link is clicked: both links and spans need to carry expository tags for the simple JavaScript function to know exactly what to move and how. Which is just to say that the result is a bit of a morass, difficult for a writer to contribute to or escape without damaging what they’ve previously created.

Since I made the site I’ve had my attention directed to a pre-existing version of the same device, which also provides tools (again, helpfully simplifying, but also limiting) for this kind of expanding text – <http://telescopictext.org> by Joe Davis.



as I can make it, a *Book of Sand*, something dreadful and exhausting. (At the moment it grows from eight words to about 6,800, if you are prepared to click 800 times.)

The clicking is a piece of mindless play – appealing in a benign way to the same sort of unfortunate instinct that could just as well ruin a human soul by attaching it to the single arm of a fruit machine. But it also changes the rhythm and manner of the text, it suits a particular voice, unfolds in a coy, digressive manner. It allows for an elaborate branching of information, but inhumed, the mirror branching of a tree's roots – the reader can unearth a single limb and then, when they have what they want, stop.

Because you are given the choice of where you would like to prod at it, the text becomes an interlocutor, not an arrow. It creates the possibility (though this barely exists in it currently, a single example) for little aleatory variations to appear in the text depending on the order or manner of the clicking, or, alternatively, for explicit choices made by the reader to be allowed to shape the narrative. (And it does these things without requiring explanation. It isn't any more complicated than it appears to be – a few sentences, a few words underlined to imply that they can be clicked.)

Over the summer, I became for a while completely entranced by a number. The number shows how many people are on the site at any one moment. It is currently zero. It is typically zero. But in July the number was for a while stung into movement. Whereas in a typical week twenty people might have visited, more than a hundred were suddenly on the page at a single time: across a day (the 24th July), more than 12,000. This is not a very large number compared to the crowds that *can* be deposited on a corner of the internet by a sudden gushing of wasted attention, but this is a site primarily about me, a subject no one cares about. And it was enough to transfix me on the new, febrile twitchings of that number. Another way in which text written for the screen differs from text on the page is the strength of the informational nerves, the bundles of connective fibres, that continue to bind you to a readership as (and if) they appear. People's engagement can be monitored as they experience the work, and if they publicly react then they do so through the same medium as the work itself.

I found a JavaScript plugin called Inspectlet – which seems, in a moral sense, open to abuse. It can record all of the actions of a visitor to any site on which it is included and then, at your request, play back everything they did while there – the

movement of their mouse cursor, their clicks, any key presses – along with information about their browser, their operating system, their screen size, and their IP address. Because the site I had made requires constant pressure from the reader in the form of the clicks, the position of the reader's focus on the page and the position of their cursor are all but perfectly aligned. After installing the plugin, I played back one of these recordings, watched someone read the site I had written, followed the movement of their eye around the page. I imagined doing the same with a novel I had written: It made me feel ill with anxiety. I'm not sure any writer would want to suffer that kind of intimacy with their readers. (But eye-tracking is becoming more and more available and affordable – if it reaches the same kind of ubiquity in our devices as motion sensors and webcams, which certainly seems possible, it won't be long before an average ebook reader is perfectly capable of capturing that information.)

There were other traces of this new readership, like comments on Twitter and in forums where the site was shared. People said that they'd found the opening story (buried in 'Hello') moving (and at least one person said that it was pointless and I should remove it). Someone helped me make the site properly responsive (I'd not quite coded it properly for viewing on phones and tablets). One person shared with me a small piece of code they'd written that automatically opened one link every few seconds, so they could watch it unfurl; they said it was like watching a story being written in front of them. Others shared little snippets of code that would open all of the links at once; someone else shared a screenshot of the entire site opened to its fullest extent as an act of kindness for others, so they could read without putting in the effort themselves. Here was the enticement and the inconvenience of a body text: the device was the only reason anyone had for visiting the site, but once there, they imagined it was an obstacle to be overcome. For days I got lost in the twitchy number and in the life of this oddity I'd made, these pleasing responses to it.<sup>88</sup>

Zadie Smith wrote: "The received wisdom of literary history is that *Finnegans Wake* did not fundamentally disturb realism's course as Duchamp's urinal disturbed realism in

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<sup>88</sup> And even, in its way, the theft (or homage, maybe) of the ad agency, was pleasing; even the strange, slightly eerie experience of watching a reader's eye and mouse move across the page.

the visual arts.’ [p79] B.S. Johnson also compared the progression of novel writing to that of the visual arts, and was characteristically incensed by authors who seemed to him perversely intent on clinging to convention:

And when they consider the other arts, are they not ashamed? Imagine the reception of someone producing a nineteenth-century symphony or a Pre-Raphaelite painting today! The *avant garde* of even ten years ago is now accepted in music and painting, is the establishment in these arts in some cases. But today the neo-Dickensian novel not only receives great praise, review space and sales but also acts as a qualification to elevate its authors to chairs at universities [...] Why then do so many novelists still write as though the revolution that was *Ulysses* had never happened, still rely on the crutch of storytelling? Why [...] do hundreds of thousands of readers still gorge the stuff to surfeit? [AYRYTBWYM?, p15]

It is interesting that Smith’s example from the world of modern art, Duchamp’s urinal, one of the most discussed and most fascinating pieces of visual art of the twentieth century, is a purely paratextual gesture (and is, in this, unlike *Finnegans Wake*, unlike *Ulysses*). While the work of both Joyce and Duchamp may constitute a disruption of realism, while both might ‘keep the professors busy’ [Ellmann, p521] as Joyce famously said he meant to, Duchamp’s *Fountain* is not straightforwardly an act of creation. It is a decision to publish an object into a new context: something mass-produced, utilitarian, mildly indecent, into the gallery, a realm of serious aesthetic consideration and the veneration of the individual artistic genius. Rather than creating a new object, Duchamp, as he wrote himself, ‘created a new thought for that object.’ [p5]

There are clearly attempts to interfere with the conventions of the book – to defamiliarise our relationship to it – that are uninteresting, self-defeating, gimmicky, mundane. Fiction, like all art, marches in dismal failure, and only sometimes strikes out in brilliant light. But so much that is often unconsidered about the book, that is mechanically practiced, can create meaning and art, if we are prepared to use it to unsettle the reader. William Gass writes, ‘These days, the text is oozing out into the very shapes of the letters themselves [...] out into the space of the print, into the nature of the page—in placement, drawings, type size, binding, cover—into all the other items of

attribution and copyright and dedication which may once have been safely “out of the book.” Nothing is now safely out of the book.’ [*Tropes of the Text*, p150]

If no part of the book is safely ‘out of the book,’ if the whole body of the thing is available to us, vulnerable – we could also look to the great mass of text that everywhere engulfs us. The adverts that surround us on the street, and those that chase us across the internet (when some algorithm suspects an unconsummated consumerist impulse). The emails that flood our inboxes and overflow into our spam folders. The alerts that brighten and shake our phones. The hundreds of thousands of tweets sent every minute. This text is not utilitarian in quite the same sense as a urinal is utilitarian – we could wish for our tweets to be as useful as a urinal – but much of it, similarly, does not aspire to be art.

It is also available to us – we can create for it new thoughts. ‘Nothing is now safely out of the book.’

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B.S. JOHNSON  
VS. DEATH

*B.S. Johnson vs. Death* is a video essay. To view it, please visit:

<http://eql.to/thesis/bsjohnsonvsdeath>

MUSCLE

## **THE TERRIBLE THING**

*The phone call had woken him, so he thought at first that the confusion was his own. His tiredness keeping him from understanding what was being said. When he recognized Box's voice he told him to get some sleep, to slow down. Drunk, he thought. The words kept coming, they came in gusts, and every one sounded cracked, broken over a knee before it was sent down the line.*

*He got anxious to be heard and understood. He pressed words into the rush of noise—Box, and, Wait. It was like pressing a tack into a wall as it fell on him.*

*When he arrived the police were already there. Later he was grateful for that—if you can believe it, him grateful to the buzzers. There were two of them, standing with their backs to the door. Box was sitting on a footstool. Funny, almost, how much too small for him it was. The policemen turned, touching their holsters, and he lifted his hands obligingly.*

*What do you want? The younger one, cheeks like scoops of ice cream. Go back to your apartment. I don't live here, he said. He called me.*

*Their hands eased from their guns, but not completely.*

*Called you when? said the older one. Black hair, face like a claw hammer.*

*Thirty minutes ago. Bernard shrugged. Forty.*

*Take a seat there and use those big hands to keep your knees warm. Nothing in your pockets is worth getting shot for.*

*He sat and the chair sagged under his weight. He felt foolishly low. He was as low as Box and facing him. Box looked changed, like he'd been taken apart and then put back together wrong, and with a smile that wasn't his.*

*You got any other explanations you want to give for the noise? said the older cop. Any good enough we shouldn't take you in?*

*Make a stop on the way to wipe that look off your face, said the younger cop, scoops of ice cream, threatening with an unconvincing fist.*

*Then Box spoke. He said, I hope you're liking this.*

*What's that? said the younger policeman, his cheeks turned cherry pink. He was immediately angry, his hand on his gun, not about to shoot, but eager to swipe Box in the face with it, could hardly*

## *Muscle*

*wait.*

*I said I hope you're liking this, said the grin, because you're on this case for another minute. Soon as you see what's through that door it gets too big for you, and you're back on the benches.*

*When they had opened the door, when they'd seen what was in there, they swung their guns around like the air of the place was under arrest. They screamed at them to get on the floor, him and Box, to get down on the floor. He got on the floor, though every lick he'd ever taken was telling him to do anything else, run or fight, anything but be restrained with things gone as wrong as they'd gone behind that door.*

*His face was inches from Box, like he was looking into a mirror. He watched as Box had his hands cuffed behind his back and felt the metal tighten around his own wrists.*

## \_\_\_\_\_’S ARRIVAL

It was raining, but not hard, so I was sitting outside the bar and smoking a cigarette. Smoking a cigarette and pat-patting the ash onto the shoes of the guy at the table next to mine, whose moustache I had taken a disliking to. That’s what I was doing when \_\_\_\_\_ fell out of the car and into the road.

\_\_\_\_\_ fell out the car hard, leading with his face, following with his knees, his arms back and up as if tied to his sides. He got to his feet quickly, but the car never completely stopped, so by the time he was standing all that remained of it was whatever of its exhaust lingered.

On his feet, he checked his pockets to see if they had left him with anything. But nothing—no wallet, not even a backstory. \_\_\_\_\_ told me later that he thought this didn’t bode well. He brushed off his suit, picked off the gravel that was clinging to his face and wiped with a sleeve at the blood above his eye. A lady with a high forehead was drinking iced tea at a table by herself. He limped briskly over to her.

I missed the start of their conversation. I was curious. I leant closer to hear what was being said.

‘I’ll find you, bitch,’ \_\_\_\_\_ was saying. “And when I do, you’re dead. *Dead.*”

That’s how \_\_\_\_\_ came to the city.

Death threats were the only thing I ever heard \_\_\_\_\_ say and not mean. His every other word was sure and straight enough to lay a drink on. If he said we were going to do you a favor, he meant it sure as hell, and if he said we weren’t there was no point arguing with him. But \_\_\_\_\_ never knew anybody for long before he threatened to kill them, and he rarely meant it. He wasn’t going to kill this lady for whatever wrong she’d done him, whether it was not being able to tell him the time or not letting him have a sip of her iced tea. And minutes later when he was threatening to kill the guy sitting nearest to me on account of his objectionable moustache (this was the first time I felt \_\_\_\_\_ and I shared something) he didn’t mean that either.



Several times over the course of our working relationship \_\_\_\_\_ threatened to kill me.

The first time we were at the fairground. We went sometimes because \_\_\_\_\_ loved the rides, particularly the rollercoasters, even though they made him sick. On the occasions when he was suffering their effects he'd sit with his head down between his spread knees, an index finger to each upper eyelid, compressing the sides of his eyeballs in a slow, steady rhythm, trying to assert a reliable impression on his senses.

On this particular trip I had taken the seat immediately in front of him on one of the rides and, on account of my height, \_\_\_\_\_'s view had been impeded and his enjoyment impaired. For this he told me exactly how the bone and cartilage of my face would collapse as he stood over me in bed that night and cratered the side of my head with the hard rim of his boot again and again until he was sure I was finished. I didn't worry. I knew by then that this was the sort of thing he threatened everybody with.

The lady with the forehead left immediately following \_\_\_\_\_'s arrival and the moustache followed soon after that. Satisfied, \_\_\_\_\_ took a seat at my table without asking my permission and, as I was left with nobody to pat ash on, we got talking. By the end of the conversation we had agreed to work together.

## BREAKING HANDS

I imagine the idea for us to work together first came to \_\_\_\_\_ because of my size. “I could use a man like you,” he said, and when people talk about me like that, as if I was a ladder or an adjustable wrench, it’s usually my size they are thinking of.

The first month, \_\_\_\_\_ had to bully work out of people. He had to have me shake work out of people. And we got given a few people to scare, a few hands to break.

Then, after that first month, word started to get around that we were the people to go to if you needed a hand broken. In this city, that was a lot of hands. You’d be surprised. It was all we ever seemed to do: find people, young men mostly, and then break hands. I began to wonder what I had thought I might get out of our arrangement to work together. Dried blood began to clog the metallic lighter I’d place between their middle and ring fingers.

It was \_\_\_\_\_ that gave me the name Box. He never really explained it to me, and I never asked, but it spoke to me of an unassuming usefulness—and it stuck, and I was glad to have it. He was a man without a backstory and it seemed generous of him to have given me a name.

## *THE STRAP*

*He scratches at it. When it becomes unbearable. Picking beneath the leather edge with his fingers. Then, later, he wonders if the skin beneath the strap, which had boiled purple and blistered and itched insufferably, has finally died, if the top few inches of him is all already dead, and if what he is waiting for, one of the things he is waiting for, is for the rest of him to catch up.*

*With time he stops wondering. He doesn't think about the strap, or notice it, or touch it, and no one else touches the strap, they know not to do that.*

*He does nothing but look out of the window, he learns to look without looking, to avoid following the movement of the people outside, to resist their pull, their pace.*

## \_\_\_\_\_ APPROACHES JARECKI

It was \_\_\_\_\_ that suggested approaching Jarecki, and I didn't discourage him, though Jarecki was a notoriously difficult character to approach. He was given to disappearing from the scene for long stretches of time. Whenever the cops were starting to namedrop him or he fell into his paranoia about assassination, Jarecki would disappear from sight. And, as he disappeared, his proxies stepped up to fill the space left in his operation.

No one knew to what extent the proxies operated independently during his absences. It could have been that nothing got back to Jarecki during these times. It could have been that everything—every dropped debt, every sneak and every call-out—did. \_\_\_\_\_ believed it did.

So even though nobody had seen Jarecki for months, \_\_\_\_\_ figured he just had to kick up enough dust to be noticed. He gave me a time to meet him, and while he was kicking I waited outside his apartment in the rain. I waited an hour until I couldn't get any wetter or wait any more. Then I tried Jarecki's club.

It was one of the two big gambling joints in the city—Danskin ran the other—and there were two types in the club. One looked like they had got lost on the way to the opera, and they could afford to be there. The other crowd were the serious gamblers, and they had nowhere else they wanted to be.

For a while I watched two gamblers playing blackjack.

A kid could learn basic blackjack strategy by rote in twenty minutes. And I've met dogs you could teach to stick with a hard total of nineteen, or to double down on eleven if the dealer's got anything but an ace showing.

The gamblers were solemn with their cards and their chips.

They weighed their options and tugged on their cuffs and tossed back their whiskies and then did exactly what they were always going to do.

They didn't seem sharp to the fact that the house was winning not because of some flaw in their tactics, but because the house is meant to win. You sit down to a game of blackjack and you begin to exist at two speeds at once. The excitement comes

from the leaps you make from one hand to the next – up or down a buck (or twenty, or a hundred, whatever it is you need to bet to get excited). But you're actually making all your leaps inside a train car, that's being borne slowly, steadily downhill. Because the house has the edge.

In everything there's a house edge. The house edge is the average amount you lose relative to any bet you make. On straights in roulette, the house edge is the \$5.20 you lose every hundred. When you get arrested in this city it's the one time in three the police choose to fix you a beating.

The two gamblers had dreamed away the house edge.

It made them boring.

I found \_\_\_\_\_ at a roulette wheel where he was throwing out chips and playing them as they fell. He was smoking cigars, abusing the croupier when he lost and abusing him good-naturedly when he won. At the far side of the table, where their drinks and their women were safe, an opera crowd had gathered to watch.

From across the room he had other attention. A man with grey fuzz for hair was surveying the whole scene, but with one cold eye for \_\_\_\_\_. He had sharp features and posture that would have shamed a parade of five star generals. This was Fylan, one of Jarecki's proxies.

\_\_\_\_\_ hit on a sixline and cheered loudly for victory and for drinks. He clapped the croupier across the shoulders and sang a happy, wordless song. From the look of the chips on the table he hadn't even come up on the spin.

He let his winnings ride.

I joined the end of the opera line, closest to \_\_\_\_\_.

He had a lot of chips. More than he should have had. The pile in front of him meant more money than we had seen in all our time breaking hands. Either he had been winning big before I arrived or there was some set-up at work I didn't know about. He glared at me. He didn't want me near him.

I watched for a while as he went about drinking, gambling and molesting with vigor.

At one point, \_\_\_\_\_ took a drink from a waitress and tossed her a chip. It clipped the side of her tray and fell to the floor in front of her. As she bent over to

collect it, \_\_\_\_\_ pushed another of his chips into his mouth and then withdrew it with a smack. His hand went up beneath her short skirt with the wetted chip. When he removed it, the chip was gone.

The waitress straightened, smiled at him and walked off without a word. The proxy, Fylan, didn't react.

There's not much you can't do in a casino as long as you're spending.

I left him to it and went to stand in the rain.

Later I dragged a mattress up the stairs to \_\_\_\_\_'s apartment and we set it up at the foot of his bed. \_\_\_\_\_ had got even drunker, he had abused the other players and begged them for spare chips, when he'd lost all he had he appealed to the house for a loan, and when he'd lost that as well he declared himself finished, vomited and walked out of the club, the white ball on the roulette wheel bouncing up flecks of his vomit. I'm sure it was a strong performance.

For three days we sat and waited.

## *A VISITOR*

*He turns carefully to see a young man has entered the room, bringing first the flush—as possibility, struck bone dead until such moments, is resparked—and then the dull shock of thought—Did I use to look like that?—as he takes in the creaseless, unfamiliar face.*

*He looks at the young man, his heart feels a foot forward of his chest, strained and tormented, he waits and suffers. The young man says nothing. He can't read him. His eyes quiver and ache, they flood with tears, and still the young man isn't telling him. What reason could he, of all people, have for being cruel to him like this? Exhausted by waiting, by sitting, he is tortured. He is made to ask—Well?—hurt but also angry, with some of his old strength.*

*The young man shakes his head and comes over to the window. He has a glass of milk with him, a sandwich on a plate. He puts them on the table. Not for today, no, Box, nothing for today. Always tomorrow though. Got to keep your strength up for tomorrow.*

*Box sees only the shake of the head and hears only that there is nothing for him to do and he turns back to the window.*

## WAITING WITH THE APARTMENT MANAGER

The apartment manager was fond of \_\_\_\_\_. He'd bring up ice in a bucket and talk to \_\_\_\_\_ while I'd sit with the bucket between my feet and work at it with an icepick. They'd have glasses of scotch on the rocks and I'd have a tall glass of ice chips, which I'd suck on while I listened to them talk.

They talked about horses, which the apartment manager liked to play. He'd say how he'd just figured out why he'd never been a winner and now that he knew he was going to start winning big. Then he'd wait for \_\_\_\_\_ to ask him about it. He liked \_\_\_\_\_ even though \_\_\_\_\_ never did ask about his system. The apartment manager would say that in all his years of cursed luck he'd never managed to lose his wife in a bet however hard he tried, and then he'd laugh until he left to get more ice. He'd talk about the cars and apartments and women he'd buy when he started winning and he talked about what he'd do with me if he could afford to have us do favors for him. A big guy like me, he figured, could do things to a lot of guys he knew who deserved it.

His wife's brother could take some hurting, could lose an inch or two in height and a pint or so of blood, he reckoned. There was a policeman who'd insisted on hauling him to court to answer a phoney vagrancy charge when all he'd done was have some drinks and forget how much coppers liked to be curtsied to and doted on. There was a woman in the building who'd no money because of all the hop she was taking—when the time came to pay the rent they'd reached an arrangement and he'd gotten something that still burned where you don't tell the ladies. When he'd had a job at the racetrack, helping out in the stables, one time a horse came in that was more handsome than any animal he'd ever seen, so he'd put some money on it, and it won. Now, he loved hamburger, thought it was the finest food there was, and don't try and tell him different. So he figured the horse would like hamburger too, figured to treat it for the win. But the horse choked on the meat. The dumb animal was fine, but he lost the job at the track and the son of a bitch who owned the horse screamed him out for a good hour and more. He was sure I could do wonderful things with a thonged blackjack and that dumb horse owner's teeth.



## *Muscle*

He gave \_\_\_\_\_ thin black cigarettes from a metal case and lighted them for him. I sucked on ice chips and listened to them talk. It never stopped raining.

\_\_\_\_\_ wanted me around all the time, but in the mornings when I'd watch him climb out of his bed and his shins walk past my mattress, he'd unlock the door of the apartment and I'd go for a walk, take the chance to stretch my legs.

## AND HIS WIFE

Once, while we were waiting, the apartment manager's wife came up as well. She had a drink and talked about how unhappy her marriage was. Occasionally the apartment manager would help her out, reminding her of the start of a story about just how unhappy they were together, then pass her a black cigarette.

She had a Broadway nose on a circus face. Her pins were muscled but looked like a map had rotted onto them. She told a dirty joke as well as anyone you ever knew.

My back had been hurting from leaning over to chip away at the ice, the bucket between my feet, so I'd been sitting on the ground with it between my thighs. A while into one of her jokes she patted the skirt that sat up over her knees and I moved over and sat between the legs. While she told the rest of the joke she stroked her hands through my hair and when she finished and I was roaring with laughter she patted my head and rubbed at my shoulders roughly, appreciatively, and I moved further into the vein-outlined world of those legs. The apartment manager blew smoke rings from his black cigarettes and scratched at the itch the hop smoker had given him.

### *THE WEIGHT OF THE DEVICE*

*He's aware that the weight of the device has given him some neck pain, but like the device itself it's just more to carry, and it's not more than he can bear. The strap holds the device on steadily. Birds fly up to the window, to the gutter above. They've made a nest there. They are small, fat birds with thin legs.*

*The first version of the device he made, the prototype, had a sharp edge that rested across his crown and cut into him. He bled, without noticing, into his hair. The edge is padded, and another like it goes across the front of his head, and the device is steady and doesn't cut him.*

## A RESPONSE FROM JARECKI, BITING

On the fourth day I came back to the apartment from stretching my legs to find that our waiting was done. There were two of them in the process of figuring out that \_\_\_\_\_ had no intention of being civil. It only soured their mood when I appeared.

The smaller one had the look animals get when they've grown accustomed to being beaten by the same people they rely on for food and care. The bigger one had a nose that had been broken so many times it lay flat on his face like roadkill. I guess not wanting it to happen again, he lowered his head and charged me back into the railing of the stairs, but I got a low uppercut in before he reached me and I felt the nose give. It didn't feel any more like breaking a nose usually does than tearing off a perforated slip feels like ripping a book in half, and it didn't stop him coming.

He had me pushed into the railing and my arms pinned, but he was clumsy and I kicked his legs out from under him. His head caught the side of the railing as he went down. He made a move to get back on his feet that was more bullheaded than graceful, so I used a fist to make sure he'd stay put.

\_\_\_\_\_ already had his smaller friend on the ground and was beating him with a belt. I took a moment to catch my breath and see if any of my ribs were broken. When \_\_\_\_\_'s arm got tired he went to his desk and wrote something out, then pulled off the sheet of paper and came over to me.

There was blood around his mouth but I couldn't see where he'd been biting the smaller man. Once he had bitten through a man's cheek and managed to pull out one of his teeth with his own. The only explanation he'd given was to say, "It was already loose."

He stuffed the piece of paper half in roadkill's fly and together we dragged the pair of them to the stairs and sent them sliding down the first flight.

The next visit we had was a telegram. It took us back to Jarecki's club the next evening.

## BERNARD OUTSIDE THE OFFICE

The ruined nose met us in the club. It had been rebuilt into a thick package of gauze—two small plastic straws sticking out where the nostrils would be. It led us through to a hidden door set into the back wall. When the door cracked I could see Fylan standing in front of a large carved desk.

\_\_\_\_\_ told me to wait outside. I wasn't so sure about that, but this was Jarecki and it could have turned into something important. I didn't want to mess things up without cause. So I stood outside and killed time listening to the breath whistling through those straws.

After a while, Roadkill spoke, told me his name was Bernard. He told me I'd picked a bad one to arm for.

I told him that wasn't how \_\_\_\_\_ and I worked.

"Right," he said. "I speak to a lot of brains out here in the cold."

After that we didn't do much talking.

When \_\_\_\_\_ came out we had our first favor from Jarecki.

## THE BIRDS

*It occurs to him to wonder what kind of birds they are, but he has no book he can refer to, no one to ask. One of the young men could bring him a book, easily, all he would have to do to get them to bring him a book would be to want them to bring him a book, but he doesn't, because he knows he shouldn't. He is indulging his interest in the birds. He refrains from chastising himself too viciously for it, because he does not want to invite the pain—is he already crying at the thought? hard to tell—and because he has not wasted too much energy on the birds, not yet. Not if he stops thinking about them now, if he lets his sense of time, his sense of pace slow again, lets the strap do its work.*

*Watching the birds would let him pass the weeks, perhaps a month. He would see them fly up over the window, and out again the same way, and over—the same again— but only until the chicks hatched and they moved on, or until the weather changed, or the rain washed them out, or some superintendent on a ladder in thick gloves threw the nest out in handfuls. Weeks, maybe a month, and he can't let his concentration rest on weeks or a month, he will not be able to last, he will not be able to last.*

## WORKING FOR JARECKI

I'm too large to make much of a tail and I sneak a bit better than I figure skate, but the work didn't tend to the subtle.

Say the well-loved daughter of a well-connected father falls for a tough, and the tough's paws turn fist too easy. The father goes to Jarecki, we go visit the tough. The friends of a new dealer at the club come visit him at his table and the house obligingly loses to them—we go see how their luck stands up to a test. We're given somebody and we extract apologies, reparations, we ease the flow of regret.

The owner of a coffee joint is given to us. We go sit, spend the day smoking cigarettes, drinking water. \_\_\_\_\_ pours liquor into his coffee from a flask. The owner is working the counter, where he spends the day pinkening every time I look at him but not saying anything. As the place empties he starts sending us free coffee, free food. We ignore it. He has an expensive wristwatch on. This is a man pleading poverty, wearing an expensive wristwatch: a romantic, clinging to heirlooms. The light's just getting dark and the coffee's just getting cold and the one waitress reaches up and pulls the string that makes it evening, like fluorescence does. And the night in the diner gets darker and emptier.

At closing the owner has the waitress ask us to leave. I keep my eyes on him, \_\_\_\_\_ looks at the waitress and puts out one finger, uses it to slowly tip a cup onto its side. The cup's empty, it just rings a small sharp note as it hits the tabletop, and she runs away like she's slapped. The owner straightens his apron and organizes his courage in a little heap and steps out from behind his counter. Before he's halfway to our table we stand and leave. The waitress, driven by an outpouring of desperate relief and gestures from this dumb counterman, locks the door tight behind us.

And then we meet him that night as he takes the garbage out the back.

The work passed the time and there was plenty of it.

We turned down a few favors from Jarecki. As when \_\_\_\_\_ didn't want to scare a girl back to work after she'd run off with a john. He'd realized that the madam, more

romantic than most and caring for the girl, was, in this instance, for love conquering all. So when we let it, the madam grew a soft spot for \_\_\_\_\_, which suited him down to the ground. Other favors he turned down for less identifiable reasons. And we did favors on the side for people other than Jarecki, so we stayed what you'd call independents.

\_\_\_\_\_ said he got our jobs straight from Jarecki himself but, as far as I could call it, he only ever spoke to Fylan, the proxy.



## SEARCHING TRUFORD'S

Bernard and a Mexican boy of about fifteen came to our door a few days later.

Bernard's nose was still bandaged, but only over the bridge, so he didn't need the straws to breathe any more. He gave \_\_\_\_\_ an address and a name on a piece of paper, and told us to go search the place. "You don't have to find anything," he said. "Just search it." The boy did nothing but flip a knife open and shut, open and shut.

The big, soft man lived on the outskirts of everything. As soon he saw us at his door he began apologizing. It was as if he had just delivered us some bad news, and he felt cut up about it, eager to make reparations. As we went in, \_\_\_\_\_ reassured him that he had nothing to apologize for, which as far as we know could be true, though the odds are always against it.

\_\_\_\_\_ starts feeling along the seam of the cushions on his seats, then slicing them open and poking around inside with his knife, like he expects to wake something sleeping in there. I unroll the blind, standing clear to let anything that might drop out drop. And when it doesn't I peer up behind it and then, to get a better view of the nothing that's up there, I tug it down.

\_\_\_\_\_ calls him Truford and asks him where it is. Truford looks at his toes like they're embarrassing him. \_\_\_\_\_ knocks down a couple of vases and asks again where it is. Truford claims he doesn't know what it is which, if it's true, makes all of us. \_\_\_\_\_ sweeps his arm through a shelf of plates and then uses his shoe to rake through the pieces. It could be anywhere, anywhere at all.

I throw everything out from the cupboard underneath the sink and a bottle—bleach, from the smell—starts leaking on the floor.

It might be tucked or taped behind a pipe, I reason, and I feel around behind the pipes. It's obvious before I touch one of them that I'm going to burn myself on it, I can feel the heat off of it, but it's got to be checked. Still the burn annoys me, and I tug on one of the other pipes, just enough that a thin spray of water begins pissing itself up against the underside of the sink.

\_\_\_\_\_ kicks loose some baseboard, then pries it free with his hands. In the bathroom I empty the pills out of their containers and the containers out of the mirrored cabinet, and pull the cabinet off the wall. I cut the toothpaste tube open and pull down the curtain rail from the shower and peer along its hollow, empty length. In the bedroom I pull the pockets and the lining off the only jacket he seems to own and fillet his mattress and his pillow.

Truford's sitting on the guts and springs of one of his chairs, like a fat angel on a broken cloud. \_\_\_\_\_ asks him again where it is. He still doesn't know, he says, which is or isn't the same as he doesn't know what it is. \_\_\_\_\_ separates the two pictures hanging on the wall from their frames. Neither showed Truford. I guess there's no space for a man like Truford even on his own walls.

## THE NEW STRUCTURE

*He thought about a time, after \_\_\_\_\_'s death, and after Jarecki's. Fylan summoning them to the casino—dead and gone too, half the tables out the door, and the other half shrouded, waiting. He remembered empathizing, he remembered thinking this was fellow-feeling for a table.*

*Fylan spoke to them from behind what had been Jarecki's desk, though it was bare now, all the ornaments—like the large walnut cigar box with the jade inlay, and the metal cube that could produce a little spout of flame—sold, or lifted and then sold, or gone with the missing tables wherever it was that they had gone. To Danskin's if he wanted them, to the heap if he didn't. Box remembered sitting beside Bernard. He remembered noticing that they all barely fit in the chairs, that they all looked older, fatter, softer. O'Day was there. O'Day who he liked because the first time they met he had shaken his hand, called him by his name, asked him about Evvie.*

*Fylan explained to them how it was—that Jarecki was dead, but that there weren't going to be any grudges held by Danskin. Fylan himself was leaving town—he made clear it was by choice—but Danskin had promised work for all of them, all those big guys, lugs, muscle, greying in the hair or losing it as they were. Bernard thanked him for having thought of them, and Box remembered doing the same, or perhaps only thinking the same. Then O'Day, who had started off shaking his head said, No, Mr Fylan, I need this job, I told you that.*

*Fylan allowed his still-elegant eyebrows to lift in surprise. He explained again that no one was losing their jobs, that Danskin bore no grudges. O'Day, he had said, smiling comfortingly, don't worry. No one's out of a job because of this.*

*But No Mr Fylan, O'Day had said, wringing his hat, you don't understand. I need this job. It's not, you know, the work. It's, you could say, the stability. His eyes were on the floor, though sometimes they rose bashfully up to the thin man behind the desk. My girlfriend, I told you how she's got these kids? I've got to show her that I'm done with moving around every month. I told her: you don't have to worry about that, I says. Mr Fylan's, you know, kinda reassured us that we don't have to worry about nothing. There's all the work we could ask for, as long as we want it. He's promised us, there's plenty of work as long as we're committed. And I told her, I'm committed now, ain't I kept telling her that? 'I'm committed now, just you watch.'*

*O'Day's grip on his hat relaxed a little. The hat was badly twisted and bent. (Like Holcomb's*

## *Muscle*

neck, Box might have thought, like Lowden's.) Mr Fylan, if I tell her now that I'm moving to work for someone else—and she's going to hear about it, nothing in the world I can do to stop that, never been any way to keep my business my business, not from her... If I tell her I'm not doing this job any more, it don't matter if I'm working for someone else, Mr Fylan, it just don't, she won't hear it. I need this job Mr Fylan, like we had agreed. That's what stability is. And she's not going to put up with it if I don't have stability, she's got the kids and she's got every reason... I'm sorry Mr Fylan, I've got to stay with this job with you that's how it's got to be.

Fylan had nodded his understanding. He ran both hands through his grey fuzz of hair. He looked tired. I know what I said, Eddie. I don't want you to feel like I've not been honest and straightforward in my dealings with you. But there isn't a job here anymore. There just isn't.

O'Day nervously throttled the hat. No Mr Fylan. There's a job here as long as I want it, that's what you said. I need this job Mr Fylan, you don't understand. Box had watched O'Day's hands glow red. He had looked at O'Day and thought he was going to cry.

Eddie, Jarecki's dead.

I know Mr Fylan. That don't change my situation.

Fylan had sighed and leaned back in his chair. The shadows had eaten at him and he looked old and tired. Does anyone else have a problem with going to work for Danskin?

No one else spoke.

Okay, Eddie, Fylan said, this job's gone, and O'Day choked the hat and started to speak, but Fylan held up a finger, but it's not your fault—Jarecki died and Danskin's moving in, and that's it, and it shouldn't reflect badly on you in any way, and I'm going to make sure it doesn't. What's your girlfriend's name?

Theresa.

I'm going to speak to Theresa, okay? I'm going to make sure she understands that this doesn't reflect badly on you, not at all. Quite the opposite—I'm going to make sure she knows what a valuable and respected employee you are. Okay?

That I'm committed. I've got stability.

She's going to know how committed you are, because your boss is going to tell her, and she's going to know that you've got a stable job and that's not about to change. Okay? Now, here. And from a drawer in the desk he had pulled four short stacks of money and pushed them across, one toward each of the big men. Danskin will be in touch. And Eddie, I'm going to talk to Theresa.

## WOKEN IN THE NIGHT, A GAME OF POKER

When \_\_\_\_\_ began to get out of bed, I woke up. When he's up first, it always wakes me, though it doesn't happen that often. This time it was still dark, the early hours of the morning.

First I hear the springs on the bed as he raises himself to sitting. Then he coughs for a while, this long prolonged fit of coughs. It's like he's a cage he's rattling to make sure he's all awake, down inside as well, and not just got his eyes open. It sounds like it hurts but gives him satisfaction. Then he spits into the handkerchief he keeps beside his bed for this purpose. And then there's the bedsprings again as he stands, and then he steps over me on his way to take a leak and dress. Except this time when I'm expecting to have him step over me, I get a kick in the ribs, hard as I ever have.

I'd thought before about whether \_\_\_\_\_ ever would try to kill me—how he would go about it. The threats don't worry you, but there are some things you do with a person, shared experiences, you'd be stupid not to hold them in your mind. And these recollections aren't something you could get rid of anyway, it'd be like a tick that you dig from your skin but the mouth tears off and gets left behind, still biting.

I was on my side, and I tried to jackknife my legs up to knock \_\_\_\_\_ to the ground, before he did whatever he was going to do next. But the pain made me buckle, clutching at my chest, and I thought I was going to vomit, but somehow I didn't. It must have looked pretty funny.

I was expecting, I guess, \_\_\_\_\_'s knife across my face or into my belly, or for him to stamp on me. Instead he mumbled something and shambled away and the lights in the bathroom flicked on, and I could hear him pissing.

When he came back out I was still clutching at my ribs, and he patted me on the shoulder and then took the glass of water I keep by the leg of his bed, filled it up and brought it back to me. Which was white of him, and not something he'd do if he hadn't felt bad about the mistake. Then he went through to the other room. After a while he was joined by some noise at the door and then a couple of voices.

A while later, when it was clear at least one of my ribs had broken and the pain

was going to make sleep impossible, I went through.

\_\_\_\_\_ was dealing cards to the apartment manager—who was talking about some leg show he'd seen—and to a space at the table where a black cigarette burned in an ashtray. Once he'd dealt they did a round of betting, folding the empty seat when its turn arrived. \_\_\_\_\_ was dealing the flop when the apartment manager's wife came back in the room. She always has a smile for me. I pulled a chair up beside her and watched as they played, the apartment manager's wife showing me her hands. Lydia she's called—why shouldn't she deserve a name?

Showing cards like that's a compliment. It shows you trust the other person not to give any hint of what the hand is like, and it's intimate. You get a better idea of how someone else plays the game when they're showing you their hands than you will any other way. You don't let someone see your weaknesses like that. Women do, I guess, when they like you. And it's okay, when it's like it was with Lydia.

When she folded a hand pre-flop she'd tell one of her jokes, and we'd all laugh. Sometimes when she got to the end of a joke, her eyes would lock with the apartment manager's, her husband's, and they'd say the last line of the joke loudly and in time, like it was a line from a song, and already laughing, and then you'd kind of see why they'd ended up together.

Eventually I left the three playing. The pain in my ribs wasn't as bad anymore, but it was bad enough that the rest of the night whenever I wasn't on my back any more I got woken up to hear about it.

## HOW \_\_\_\_\_ PLAYS CARDS

The poker games began to happen weekly, sometimes twice a week. Normally just with \_\_\_\_\_, the apartment manager and Lydia, sometimes with one or occasionally two other players—friends of the apartment manager, usually, people he knew from the building or from the track. Those from the track bet big, hurriedly, eager to lose and recreate the thrill of losing on the horses.

When the apartment manager or Lydia took a break I'd sit in for them, or else Lydia would show me her hands, or else I'd just sleep and never mind the game in the other room.

When \_\_\_\_\_ plays poker with people he hasn't played with before, you can see him begin by playing cautiously. If he starts off betting big, no one believes him. People think they know a man like \_\_\_\_\_ very quickly. If they met him twice they'd think they knew all there was to know. And they guess from the type of man they think he is that he's going to play recklessly.

He could win by betting like that, I'd seen him do it a couple of times, but only when the people he's playing with are too scared to beat him. When they fold to a raise it's not because they think he's got them outmatched, it's because they think it would embarrass \_\_\_\_\_ if they called him and he had to admit a dud hand, and they think the chips are not worth whatever \_\_\_\_\_ might do to someone who embarrassed him.

So \_\_\_\_\_ plays slowly to begin with, plays even good hands gently, until they come to believe he's a man who can control his temper, who won't go all in on a Jack high and a sore head, but can wait for the cards and then play them the way they deserve.

\_\_\_\_\_ plays cards like a saint.

### *THE THINGS HE WOULD SAY TO HER*

*He thinks about the things that he would say to her in those moments when they were alone and he was at ease, when those moments came. He remembers telling her about the things in her that just tore him to pieces, the beautiful things that just cut all his strings and hurled him from every ledge, but he also remembers thinking these things and not being able to say them, and he hopes for one of these memories to be true over the other, or for both to be true, even that, that even occasionally he let her know all he wanted to let her know about those things that just tore him to pieces. He remembers once when she was asleep and he told her then, the things in her that tore him to pieces, and what he would do if he lost her, though he hadn't known what he would do, and he didn't want to think about it, and he didn't say any of what he said out loud because she was sleeping.*

*He remembers, with some effort he remembers her knowing exactly what he said without him even having to say it, and if she knew it, did it matter that he remembered not saying it, remembered not saying it more strongly maybe than he remembered saying it? She knew it. And he tries to think as her, who could know what other people would say and could say what she meant, had that in her, being grateful for the things she knew he meant and maybe couldn't say.*



## A SAP IN HIS HOTEL ROOM

I sat outside and shared some silence with Bernard while \_\_\_\_\_ was in talking to Fylan. By now his nose was only ribbed with thin, slightly bloodied strips of bandage, a raised ripe scab down its crooked middle. At one point he looked almost like he was going to offer me a cigarette, which was white of him.

\_\_\_\_\_ came out with our instructions and we went to a hotel a couple of blocks from Jarecki's. We got past the desk and up to our floor without difficulty. \_\_\_\_\_ took a butterfly knife from his pocket. He flicked his hand and the blade opened out and then was clinched again at the base by the two sides of the handle. Before he moved toward the door with the knife I asked if maybe he minded if I had a go opening this one. \_\_\_\_\_ pursed his lips for a moment, not like he was really considering, and then explained that he was better at this than me, which was true, and what if I botched it and then the guy comes in, not an unsuspecting sap, relaxing in his private, secure room, but alert and on edge with every chance to get a rod out.

I thought about how was I ever going to get any better at it without a chance to practice? But this was a conversation we'd had before and I was not in a mood to go through it again. It would end, I knew, with mention of one occasion when my frustration led to a door being kicked from its frame.

So \_\_\_\_\_ got the door open and we went in.

The hotel needed better maid service or better guests. Clothes caked the two chairs, the desk and the floor, a towel was drying on the bed sheets and an ashtray overflowed onto the pillow at the head of the bed.

\_\_\_\_\_ looked around and then removed his homburg and tucked himself in behind the curtain with a gesture to follow. The curtain was already drawn over the window. It was a new hat, the black homburg, a good hat. \_\_\_\_\_ extruded from the curtain, a man in outline. You could see the shape of the hat he held to his chest.

But you've got to figure that two pairs of shoes under a curtain is no more conspicuous than one, so I took off my hat and crept in alongside him.

After ten minutes I stopped trying to stand pigeon toed when it was clear that it

was uncomfortable and wasn't working to hide my feet anyhow. Even if the sap didn't make us before he even entered the building, just by looking up from the street and seeing the two of us pressed against his window, toes were the least of our worries. And if \_\_\_\_\_ was doing any better at not being visible from the room it was only because I was acting as a tent pole, sheltering him. I was a big dumb ghost in a sheet, with a smaller ghost hiding in his skirts.

We stood and we waited, and it got dark, and our sap came in and flipped on the light. We waited for him to identify the newly risen mounds in his curtain. With the light on we could see him through the material, and he was singing a show song to himself. He had to see us. Had to. We couldn't have been any more visible if we'd been nude. If we'd been alight. If we'd had stage names and faces from the paper and spotlights trained on us.

But damned if he didn't just toss his jacket on a chair, spin a merry spin on the balls of his feet, and finish his song with his hands on his hips, his back to the window and his head in easy reach of \_\_\_\_\_'s blackjack.

So \_\_\_\_\_ reached.

And we snapped bracelets on the unconscious sap, slung him in a chair and waited for someone to show.

## QUESTIONING THE SAP

\_\_\_\_\_ smoked a cigarette and I drank enough water that I regretted it when I saw the care the hotel or its clients took of the toilet, and I ended up pissing in the sink, in a swirling, difficult manner. It all risked the kind of mistake that would have had to be taken out on the hide of the sap in the chair, but I remained dry and he got lucky.

The phone rang and \_\_\_\_\_ glanced at his wristwatch and ignored it, and we let it ring for as long as it cared to. In the chair, the sap slept soundly on.

We kicked our heels for a while, until the phone rang again and \_\_\_\_\_ checked the time and picked up the receiver, and spoke without waiting, telling them to send him up. I took a guess that 'him' was Fylan.

\_\_\_\_\_ considerably took the ring off his right hand and slapped the sap's face back and forth a couple of times, and I took the opportunity to get rid of the rest of a glass of water by throwing it over him. The sap's head lolled side to side and his mouth began chewing on vowels and letting them drip off him with the water.

There was a knock on the door. \_\_\_\_\_ opened it, and it was Fylan that came in, with his short grey hair and eyes that looked like you could use them to cool your drink.

The sap's own eyes were just agreeing to work together in the pursuit of common goals and together they located Fylan, and an amount of fear shot through them that it's not an easy thing to earn. I felt impressed with Fylan, who could incite this wide-eyed animal terror in the handcuffed man. I already knew I liked Fylan. The impression he always gave—in the way he moved and the way he talked—was one of nothing being wasted, not a movement, or a thought, or a mercy.

He asked us to leave the room. I'd reached the door to the corridor and had it open when I realized that \_\_\_\_\_ wasn't behind me. He was peering over Fylan's shoulder at the sap. It took Fylan turning around and looking him in the eye and asking again before \_\_\_\_\_ understood that it wasn't just big lugs like me that had to wait outside.

In the corridor, \_\_\_\_\_ and I talked about how we'd hidden behind the curtain with

the blackjack. We discussed how unlikely it was that even a dumb sap like the one we clearly had on our hands would miss us. Would miss us and then wander directly over to the curtain, and then obligingly turn, as if presenting his hatless crown for the blackjack. We'd started to talk percentages and odds when Fylan opened the door and told us to come in.

He said there were a couple of things he had to check out, and depending on how well-informed the man in the chair turned out to be, he might have a few follow-up questions to present to him, so to keep him there.

And then Fylan breezed.

## AN EXPERIMENT

I sat on the edge of the bed and watched as \_\_\_\_\_ tipped back the brim of his homburg and started to light a cigarette. But just as he had his hand cupped around the flame, he stopped, shook out his match and put the pill away again. He said we should have a bet, put a fin on it.

He went over and snapped his fingers in front of the eyes of the sap in the chair. "Buddy," he said, looking to see if he was awake. The sap was awake, but he looked plenty tired. \_\_\_\_\_ clicked his fingers a couple more times. When the sap had begun to pay attention to him, \_\_\_\_\_ lay his blackjack across his head, knocking him cold.

Then \_\_\_\_\_ knelt down in front of the again-unconscious sap, unlocked and removed his handcuffs. He picked up my hat from where I'd left it, shoved it at my chest and told me to come on, then removed his homburg and hid behind the curtain again.

We must have waited back there a half hour, our bodies shaping the curtain like we were lying under a cover, our toes chilling themselves in the room, before a groaning came from the chair, the sap rubbing his head where he'd been twice laid out by the blackjack. He kept groaning and was saying some pretty restrained things about the Almighty, considering, when he seemed to realize that rubbing his head like he was meant he wasn't wearing the bracelets any more, and all at once he leaped from the seat, his knees bent and his arms to his side. \_\_\_\_\_ jabbed at me with his elbow, edging over so he could see better through the split in the curtain. The sap stood up straight and looked around the room. Then he opened the outside door and looked both ways along the corridor. Not so much as a curious glance at the shapes in his curtains. Then, filled with resolve he ran over to his jacket, grabbed it from its chair, threw it on, seized his hat, and stood in front of the curtain with his hands on his hips looking around for anything else he might have needed. Which is when \_\_\_\_\_ reached forward with the blackjack.

We came out and stood over the sap. \_\_\_\_\_ looked down at him like he was a mouse who'd been given a maze to run and was curled up at the start gnawing its own leg.

## *Muscle*

I handed \_\_\_\_\_ a fin, and we dragged the sap back to his chair, put him back in bracelets and waited for Fylan to return or for the phone to ring.

### *THE TIMES HE WAITED FOR HER*

*He thinks about the times he waited for her. Not the first time, when there was something in the waiting that made him proud, and would have justified itself if she hadn't been more than justification enough, but one of the times when it was a shameful, corrosive waiting and he subjected her to it, wore at her until he got his way, again, even though he had deserved to lose it, even though he had thrown it away.*

*He would go to her apartment. He would go to her work. He would wait in the hall without so much as knocking. He would knock and she wouldn't answer. He would knock and she would answer but say nothing. He would knock and she would turn him away and he would go and he would come back. He would always leave as soon as she—but only she—asked him to, every time she asked him to, even if she asked him twenty times in a day. He was submissive, docile. He was relentless and unkind.*

## THE KID AT THE POKER GAME

One of the card game nights they were joined by a scrawny kid and the four of them played: \_\_\_\_\_, the young kid, the apartment manager, and Lydia, who was showing me her hands.

The kid's talking plenty to begin with. He's not saying very much, but he's talking. He's the sort that holds his cigarettes only in ways that don't quite make sense, like he's over-thought the whole exercise and now he's worried it won't be impressive enough to just hold it like a damn cigarette.

It's a friendly game and accordingly the chips are pretty sociable, they're passing the time with everybody in turn—but when this kid wins a stack, pride colors his face and his back straightens right out. It's his dignity standing to attention. It's like seeing a corpse jump to its feet and give itself a round of applause.

When this happens, Lydia tells a joke, distracting from this display, because she's a good one and because it's embarrassing, watching the kid win.

If you give yourself a parade every time you take a hand, it's a cinch you're not the kind of person it's hard to read—win like that, no one with any sense has to watch it happen too often.

And then the kid starts getting bad hands and keeps playing them. It's clear they're bad because he gums up. He's still okay in chips, but he stops talking. He's not even laughing at Lydia's jokes, and she tells a dirty joke as well as anyone you ever knew. But he raises, and then when he loses his back crimps, the sad reverse of the military posture he gets when he wins.

You could beat him at cards dead drunk in a dark room so long as you had a protractor to take the angle of his spine.



## KID'S CALLED HOLCOMB, THE STORY OF RED RIDING HOOD

The kid became a regular. He had a name—Holcomb. He played cards and he drank and he never seemed to get any better at either. And he talked, which he could do.

There was one hand late in an evening where Holcomb was almost out of his chair with excitement right from the deal but the apartment manager was too drunk to notice. Lydia had one arm across her belly, the other pressing a black cigarette to her lips, the lips much more red than normal. She was in kind of a mean mood, where sometimes the day after a mood like this and with her husband on a drunk, you'd see him wondering what he'd done to get almost markless but professionally painful wounds on his arms, and on one occasion a cigarette burn in the centre of his back up between his shoulder blades, right where he couldn't reach it or quite see it properly, running out his door whenever he heard feet on the steps to get someone else to take a look and give him word on what exactly was back there.

So Lydia began laughing at the apartment manager as he kept raising. The kid Holcomb is helium at this point, his bright eyes all the way up by the ceiling. The kid's too flush with excitement to care about Lydia and the apartment manager's too far gone to pay any attention to the laughing anyway.

And of course it ended as a big win for Holcomb. Though it's less a win for the player than it is for the cards, in this instance.

And he raked the chips to himself and then lighted a new cigarette, and as the next hand was being dealt he gave a wave over his part of the table like a magician over a coin trick that meant he wanted dealt out.

And while the other three played the hand, and for the next couple of hands as well, he started to talk about the story of Red Riding Hood, which I'd heard, and the Grimm brothers, who he seemed to think were quite the deal but were news to the rest of the table. And he said that in the story of Red Riding Hood a little girl has been sent through the woods to visit her sick grandmother. And a bad wolf knows this, because he speaks to Little Red Riding Hood, and for some reason she gives him the straight tip on it. And the wolf goes ahead to grandma's house and eats the old lady and dresses in her

old lady nightclothes and climbs into her bed and waits for Red Riding Hood.

And Lydia showed me the low pair in her hand and then folded it to a modest raise from \_\_\_\_\_. And she picked up her cigarette and said that she didn't know about the rest of the table but she'd had a childhood and parents and— (and she drew a circle with the smoke to say, and so on). She seems older when she's in a mean mood. She tells fewer jokes, though they're just as funny. I was thinking I might take a glass of milk and go get some sleep.

Holcomb took a draw on his pill and piped the smoke thinly from the corner of his mouth, taking his time.

And according to the Grimm brothers, Red Riding Hood arrives and admires the wolf's eyes and ears and teeth, and the wolf eats her up, and then a hunter comes by. And the hunter cuts open the wolf with a scissors and gets little Red Riding Hood and the grandma out, and piles rocks into the wolf in their place, and then sews the wolf up again. And it's having a belly full of rocks that does for the wolf in the end.

But, Holcomb says, the wolf's still lucky. Even the wolf in the next story, that no one remembers, the wolf that ends drowned in grandma's gutter chasing the sausage smell of cooking water is lucky. Because a twist like Red Riding Hood is always going to find a story to be a part of—some characters just have adventures thrown at them—but what's so special about a big, dumb animal, with big teeth and big claws and no sense? And the grandma—if she didn't have little Red Riding Hood as an affectionate, selfless granddaughter, what are the chances she'd get to be in any stories? She'd just be an old woman, sick and bed-bound, alone in the woods.

So, another version of the story, Holcomb says: Red Riding Hood's on her way to grandma's, and the wolf talks to her and then goes on ahead and devours grandma, but Red Riding Hood is distracted by another adventure, another story going on in the other direction through the woods, with a witch, or brothers turned into swans, or some bears instead of a big cruel wolf. So the wolf waits in bed, in grandma's nightclothes, with the grandma's sheets pulled up to its neck, but Red Riding Hood doesn't come.

"And after waiting for so long in the too-small bed," he goes on, "the wolf's back begins to hurt, so as he scours the shelves of the house for something to eat, he finds that he's begun to walk with a stoop. And as winter draws in, his feet are always sore and he has to rub them before trying to stand. And the wolf's big eyes are no longer as good

for seeing anything with, and the wolf's ears can barely hear the wind whipping at the walls of the cottage, and the wolf's teeth hurt whenever he bites anything, and he's glad when one would fall out. And soon the wolf has no appetite at all and the grandma-nightclothes that used to bind his legs they were so tight, well, they hang loosely on him. And the wolf comes to think of himself as living in another wood, a wood within the cottage within the wood, an interior wood where each tree is another ache somewhere in his old body, and all the trees grow unnoticeably bigger day by day by day. And still his granddaughter hasn't come to bring him some cake or a bottle of wine. And his hair is matted and thinned, and sometimes in the morning he finds clumps of it in his bed, which he assiduously tidies, because it's important to keep the place nice, even if no one is coming. And still the forest of aches in the wolf grows bigger and its branches more elaborately entwine, and he forgets ever living anywhere but amongst its dull pains and occasional sharp agonies in his small cottage, as his memory fades and dims."

### *ONCE, AS HE WAS WAITING, AN OLD MAN*

*He thinks about one of the times he waited for her. One of the times in particular. When he was walking to her, and it was not his first time going to her apartment that day, and as he walked up the shallow hill he came upon an old man with a cane walking in the same direction. It was only as he was about to draw level that he became aware of how slowly the old man was moving, each of his movements so miniature that after each step it would be almost impossible to say that he had definitely moved at all. The old man would press his left foot forward, advancing it not even as far as its own length, then drag his right after it, then plant the cane ahead of the next piece of ground to be covered. His head and his attention were directed down at this uncomplicated effort. He didn't seem tired, he didn't groan or sigh. He moved like a man who has died and sets to work on all the jobs that attended to his own funeral.*

*Box saw the old man and decided to play a harmless kind of game. He would step ahead of him at the moment when the left leg had advanced and before the right began its crawl toward it. And as he did, he adjusted the timing of his steps so the back of his own right heel would align with the old man's, so he would be able to compare the size of their steps. It had been days since he had allowed himself to be as interested in anything as he was in this experiment.*

*He passed the man, resisting the temptation that appeared from somewhere to exaggerate his own step. He was for a moment elated at the results. It would take, he figured, as many as half a dozen of the old man's three-part shuffles to match a single one of his steps. And in the time each took, he would have walked maybe four steps further, as many as four. Just as the elation had come, it soured and blackened, became thick and impossibly heavy. There were no buildings on the street he could imagine the old man going into, and the nearest corner was perhaps 200 yards away. How long would it take him to reach? How many more corners after it would there be? Box tried not to think about it, he tried to ignore the sadness that had filled him, but it stayed with him for the rest of the walk to Evvie's, like flypaper that he dragged with him, covering him, piercing him and cloistering his heart.*

*Evvie didn't answer his knocks. He waited at her door. A young man came along, handsome, probably, Box thought. Good clothes. The young man regarded Box with an expression that was civil and confused and then knocked. Evvie immediately let him in, her eyes keeping clear of Box like a bad neighborhood. Box heard them talking on the other side of the door. The young man sounded as if he was being open-minded, even sympathetic to the figure on the other side of the door. Box guessed that*

*the young man felt he understood immediately the situation and knew of course what should be done, and better than Evvie, probably he always knew what should be done, in every part of his life. Evvie sounded frustrated. Still, she opened the door. Leave, Box, she said. Go away. And he left.*

*As he walked, he thought about the young man, his tie and face and hands, his self-assurance. Then he saw a child sitting in the front seat of a car, playing at steering, and with a start realized where he was, that he was on the street where he had seen the old man, and looked up the sidewalk to find a man coming toward him and he flooded with fear, awful fear that it was the old man with the cane, and he thought he might cry out or worse to know that he was still walking up this road, only it wasn't him, it wasn't the old man, but someone else entirely, someone who didn't suffer as he walked, and Box was calmed and better able to cope. And then he saw the old man, who had crossed to the other side of the road and was advancing his cane. How long must it take him to cross the road? thought Box, but he didn't cry out.*

## DANSKIN AND JARECKI, THE TAKING OF GABRIEL

Danskin, Jarecki's competition in the city, he had his own club, his own casino, his own share of the going rackets, and pockets big enough for his own slice of the police force. He had plenty of his own muscle.

The city was too big for one man to own it whole cloth, so Jarecki and Danskin tolerated each other's presence. But their nearness in size made the peace between them a particular kind of uneasy. As near as anyone could judge it they both carried the same weight and respect, the difference between them a matter of nickels and dimes, which each carefully counted and each decided fell in his own favor.

The lesser man in any setup is always prone to indignities—raids, passing money up, receiving judgement when he gets above his station... Every so often, in all kinds of ways, he's made to pay. It's a case of who suffers at the house edge.

When both think the other ought to be suffering—even suffering at fairly amenable rates—both make it happen, and neither suffers well when it cuts back on him.

For most of their operations—the big deals, the clubs—Jarecki and Danskin co-existed without much trouble, but at the fringes they made some friction. And there were incursions and there were paybacks.

We were an incursion, or we were payback, and it just depended which side of the line you stood.

One of Danskin's boys had got on the wrong side of Jarecki. Whether or not he knew he had wasn't a question for us.

He was called Gabriel. He had knocked around a girl—something he'd done before, but in the past it had always been one of Danskin's girls, and with Danskin Gabriel enjoyed immunity. With Danskin, if he used a couple of girls to get some of the dust off his knuckles, that was his business.

He didn't get that freedom with Jarecki, and this time he'd taken it out on a girl who belonged to someone who belonged to someone, who belonged to— and at the

top of the chain was Jarecki, and then it becomes politics.

We took him off the street outside Danskin's club, where it would be clear that we knew exactly who he was. The club is called "The Little Death," which is one way to bring in the crowds.

Soon we're mainly waiting for the times when he regains consciousness. I'm drinking water and \_\_\_\_\_'s throwing his knife into the wall, and Gabriel wakes up cautiously and feels around his mouth with his tongue, counting the missing teeth, touching the split across the top edge of his lower lip. The eye that can still blink, blinks. He moves one leg off the bed clumsily, like it's weighted. Then the other, then he stands in a great push of effort. One arm's no good, but his legs can hold his weight. Maybe they couldn't if he still weighed what he did a week ago, but now he's not got much of an appetite for anything, his rib cage is visible through the sagging armholes of his vest. He tries a slow turn of the bad arm. His shoulder resists unevenly like its rotation is moving through different thicknesses of struggle and hurt. \_\_\_\_\_ throws his knife a couple more times then we get on with the business of bouncing the guy off the walls.

### *AFTER VISITORS*

*When they come, when they shake their heads, and give their brief reports—No, Not today, Maybe tomorrow, No nothing yet, No, No, No—and they leave food or they take it away, or they put a blanket over him or they try and change his shirt and sometimes he'll let them, now that they know not to touch the device. After they have left he will think something, maybe, about how strange it is that they look so different to him. Or he will wonder how it could be that there was once a time, though he is sure there was, he remembers it, that they didn't know not to touch the strap. It is beyond him.*



## BACKSTAGE AT THE LEG SHOW

Danskin's Little Death wasn't the only place in town you could go to see a legshow.

As well as his casino, Jarecki owned what used to be a picture house. He'd got it cheap after a cop died in a shooting there. The circumstances hadn't been good, but few enough people knew the details that the force only had to crack a few heads to claim the moral high ground and shut the place down.

Jarecki had ripped out the screen and the seats. He got tables made that matched the slope of the floor. He got chairs that didn't, but put his waitresses in outfits that pretty much guaranteed that no one would ever notice. And twice a night and three times on weekends there was an elaborate dance number on stage, and the rest of the time there were still leg kicks and sweet young souls singing their hearts out. It was a swell place, and swells filled it. The new club thrived, and Danskin's Little Death didn't suffer, pretty girls being one of those industries that makes its own rules, demand-wise.

The day after we returned Gabriel to his owner, I sat backstage while \_\_\_\_\_ talked with Fylan about things that didn't concern me, which is how \_\_\_\_\_ would sometimes describe all the things that concerned me that he didn't want me to have a say in.

It was daytime. The only thing going on was practice, and even practice was taking a break. The girls came through, standing and sitting, rubbing sore thighs, tugging each other's hair. They had on little or no make-up, hair tied back, all twelve within an inch of the same height, all wearing show shoes that glittered and their own clothes that didn't.

One of the girls was being teased by the rest. They took turns with snide remarks about her as their attention and their cigarettes allowed.

She had been called Diamond, but had changed her name to Dorothy when she started dancing. The other girls couldn't believe that her parents had given her this gift, this perfect name for the sort of stage they kicked their heels on, and she had changed it. And to Dorothy, passing the rest of them as they went by on the other side of the road, racing on their way to Ruby, Mia, Candy.

This is what they were teasing her about, but why they were teasing her was

obvious. It was that when all these girls walked into a room, she was the one you saw. She had apple-round cheeks on a young, slim face—younger than her firm legs and much younger than her eyes, which shone darkly. And even in the loose, ill-fitting clothes she'd worn to practice, she had a body that'd make your imagination slip its leash, whether or not you knew you had one. Eleven other beautiful girls, and with her there they were all flashlights at a summer picnic.

This scene, the backstage teasing, was clearly nothing new. Dorothy watched it all like she was waiting for her cue. She had one leg crossed over the other and held a cigarette between two steepled fingers, while with her other hand she rubbed a thread or maybe a bit of dropped tobacco between two of her fingers and looked twice as good as breakfast. Eventually the other girls had all laughed themselves hoarse with jealousy at the one who would always get exactly as much of the stage and the spotlight as she wanted. Dorothy put out her cigarette and, before she stood, slapped her hands against her legs. It was a man's gesture, and then as soon as she was standing there was no trace of it. She could have been on screen or painted on canvas. There wasn't a part of her that looked anything but deliberate and whoever had put it all together had talent and a hell of an eye.

Her voice was something elegant and clear she held somewhere down on the slight curve of her stomach. When she began to speak it was over the last of the chatter, but it sounded like a long silence had just been broken.

As she talked she told the other girls some ugly truths, and she didn't care that they hurt. And you'd have wanted her to tell you ugly hurtful things too, just so she'd look you in the eye while she did it and you'd get to know that thoughts of you were moving those lips.

She told them how it had never mattered what her name was. She pronounced each of the other girls' names in turn, and made each sound boring and leaden, and you could tell they hated themselves for not being able to think a bad thought about this Dorothy's posture, or her looks, or her long, firm body, or her callous, impeccable mouth. She told them that they needed their names to get noticed. She didn't. When she'd grown up in her own little no horse town, a big city photographer approached her on the street, and she'd said no because he dressed cheap. Would they have done that? Wasn't it the sort of thing they dreamed would ever happen to them in their own no

horse towns?

She'd been pacing slowly, her calf getting taut as each heel placed itself on the ground, first her left leg then her right then the left again in a way that demanded constant attention. And now she came over to me and sat on my lap and tangled her legs around each other and gave a yawn that stretched her out from top to tail.

"I knew I was going to be here tonight, out front and centre, even then," she said. She looped her arm as far across my shoulders as it would go and swung her dangling legs playfully. She'd made me into a prop for her, into her stage. It was exciting. "I love you all, and I need you all. Because a room is just so boring without wallpaper, don't you think?" she said, and she took a long drag on her cigarette and let the smoke spill from her nostrils and lazily unfurl into my eyes.

And then a weary man with his sleeves rolled up came and clapped his hands at them, until they all put out their lights and went back to practice, eleven cute little tricks and one name for the playbill.

## MONEY BUT NOTHING TO DO, THE SMELL OF ONIONS

And then \_\_\_\_\_ reappeared, looking aggrieved.

He patted an envelope impatiently against his thigh, jerked his head toward the exit with a brisk whistle between his front teeth and I followed him out. In the street \_\_\_\_\_ pulled the lip of the envelope back with a finger to show me the contents and flicked through them with his thumb. The envelope was full of notes—twenties mainly but a few hundreds. He took out about half of the pile and handed it to me.

He told me I could go get a coffee, take in a show. I could go bark at cars for all he cared. Jarecki had said there wasn't any work going, wouldn't be anything for us to do for a while.

Then he pulled his pack of cigarettes from his jacket pocket and gave a little jerk with his hand, as if he had been about to toss the packet into the air and immediately thought better of it, so that one of the pills jumped half clear of the rest. He put this one in his mouth and searched his pockets until he found a light.

I looked through the money he'd given me a couple of times and told him I thought I'd go get a steak.

So the two of us went and sat in a place and ordered two rare steaks from the waiter, with one beer and one glass of water to go with them.

As \_\_\_\_\_ finished the beer and ordered a second, we got the smell of the butter and the onions hitting the pan, and we moved to sit at the counter in front of the grill, so we could get more of it. \_\_\_\_\_ was having the onions with his steak, I was just having the steak, and it was good and properly rare.

After we'd finished \_\_\_\_\_ took another beer and I had one too, though I don't often drink beer.

And when that was done we had another one, and ordered some more onions, not to eat, just so we'd get the smell again as they were being cooked.

After that it was maybe four in the afternoon, but we were both tired, the sort of tiredness you get from doing nothing, the sort of tiredness you always get if you watch other people exhaust themselves.

Back at the apartment we brushed our teeth at the sink. \_\_\_\_\_ is more thorough than me and I was done first. I reached forward with a glass to fill it at the tap, and almost got it filled with the last of \_\_\_\_\_'s spitting, and we apologized, each to the other.

Then \_\_\_\_\_ got into the bed and I lay down on the mattress on the floor and we slept through the day, which was the Tuesday, and right through the Wednesday.

Thursday I got up and went round the block while \_\_\_\_\_ was still sleeping. That got me tired again and I figured we should eat something, so I soft-boiled a dozen eggs and we had them with the toast from a loaf of bread, \_\_\_\_\_ sitting at the table in his vest and shorts.

We spent the rest of the day throwing cards from a deck across the room into \_\_\_\_\_'s hat.

### *THAT IT SHOULD TAKE SO LONG*

*At the beginning, he does not think it strange that it should take so long, because once something so terrible has been done of course it would not be easily undone. And then, later, he does not think it strange that it should take so long because he teaches himself to expect nothing of time, to exist without it. The sun can rise at midnight; flurries of snow can bury the summering city: he is holding fast and won't be disturbed; he is slowed and trusts that they will keep trying on his behalf. They will pan through mountains of grit for a moment so precious and kind it will end the timeless waiting. They will bring him a thread to noose all the regret that holds him here, to get him back to what he was and what he had. And however long it takes he knows that it will have been cheaply earned.*

\_\_\_\_\_ SAYS HE HEARD FROM JARECKI

Then the Friday I woke up to find \_\_\_\_\_ already dressed. He was flattening his hair with pomade and wearing a necktie. He'd shaved for the first time since before we'd had our steaks.

He told me to get dressed and sharpen up, Jarecki had been in touch and we were going to need some of our senses—we weren't just taking our hats for a walk. I nodded at him and shaved and got dressed. \_\_\_\_\_ being so dapper made me look at my own suit, and there was a rip by the right shoulder where the stitches at the seam had given. I put my arm out in a slow, lazy right hook and the split widened like a grinning mouth.

## A DAY IN THE NEW QUARTER, WATCHING

We walked toward the new quarter of the city while the sun was still low in the sky, sending long shadows at us. The last mile was through what had once been a nice suburb. A place where you could free the kids with an untroubled mind, and while they were playing in the street, maybe take a dive beneath the hood of the family car, get some sun and a bit of grease on your skin. But a bad surgery had given it a new type of building, taller and sometimes neon fronted, and some of these were pawnshops and poolrooms. As we walked down the middle of the empty street ahead of us were the one-storey homes with attached lawns and mortgage worries, and to our side, approaching with us, the city came creeping in, with broken glass on apartment stoops and all the things you didn't want to get involved in or you wouldn't have moved out to the suburbs.

And as the city jostled at the good people of the suburbs from one side, on the other side there was the new quarter, ugly and hostile because it was so exposed and unmade, like a skeleton hung with skin the way a coat hangs on a hat stand. It had only been half built, and now it was leaving.

Mixers and scaffolds had moved in, and men with clipboards and deadlines to meet. Together they started to make the shell of a neighbourhood, which was going to be filled with wiring and water flowing through pipes, the healthy guts of a place. Then the money had stopped because the main investor had gone to jail. He was what they call a man of means, so if he was unlucky he might have spent as much as whole night there, but not so long the mice would remember him. It was enough for him, anyway, judging by how quick he hustled out of the city. And with him gone, work on the new quarter stopped overnight.

We had to move out of the road for a frame house being dragged away on wheels. And the patient desert waited.

We went in through a hollow timber doorframe.

With a couple more sections of floor and maybe a few more panes of glass you would have been happy to call it a room. \_\_\_\_\_ said that this was it, we were here, but



his voice disappeared into the holes in the walls. He went and pulled a folding metal chair from behind a tarp that was protecting the dignity of a pile of dirt. The chair's voice as he scraped it across the concrete floor was a lot clearer than his had been.

He set the chair up beside a window that was really just a ten-inch thick and five foot square absence of wall.

I went looking for another chair, but without luck.

As I walked back to \_\_\_\_\_, he had taken a small pair of binoculars from somewhere and was using them to peer out the window, his neck extended forward as if someone was holding a lit cigar to the back of his head. He had a small notepad on his knee and a pencil between his teeth.

I looked out the window. There were two sidewalks but no blacktop on the road that split them. Opposite was another hollow, unfinished building, this one taller and weakly impressive, its stucco flourishes making it look like a small courthouse. It felt good that in this state of derelict pre-existence these marks of notability made that building more ridiculous than ours.

After an hour of standing, I took the working end of a snapped brush from the corner of the room and cleaned as much of the dirt and dust as I could from the concrete floor in front of the window and sat down. \_\_\_\_\_ was still attentively leaning forward. When he had the binoculars hanging on the tether around his neck you could see the impressions in his face where the eyepieces pressed. They were deep and red.

Sitting on the floor, my view out the window was angled so I could see only the top half of the upper floor of the official-looking building. Whatever \_\_\_\_\_ was watching for, all I could see were rain gutters and a whole lot of sky. I was trusting that if anything happened he'd let me know, and I'd be able to stand and take an active part in this thing we were involved with.

It stopped raining after a while and the clouds became occasional instead of a mass.

\_\_\_\_\_ took a couple of tongue sandwiches from his pocket and handed me the smaller one. I ate it and watched as the bread slowly uncreased itself from the journey.

A cloud looked like a fraction of the turn of a lady's ankle as it goes into a high-heeled shoe. Another one looked like the rear of a crashed car. Another like the bottom of a pair of cactuses, like it was a part of a much bigger scene in a western. The sky

underneath it was reddening so I guess that was the western's desert, although the timing wasn't quite right—a half hour later and the trick would have worked.

It was only when \_\_\_\_\_ sat bolt upright in his chair that I noticed he'd been slouching back at all, or that it was beginning to get too dark to see him clearly.

It took me a while to get to my feet. My legs were sore and stiff and I needed to put my cigarette out to have both my arms free to raise myself.

When I got so I could see out the window at what \_\_\_\_\_ was watching, it was a man in ripped trousers with his back to us, relieving himself on a stack of planks beside the opposite building's wall. He was unlit by any street lights or from windows. When he was done, he hoisted his clothes around himself and picked up the least crushed of a pile of beer cans from beside his right foot and drank from it.

Then he turned and walked in the direction of the building's entrance. Half way there he stopped and vomited, emptying his head like a bucket. Then he went back inside the building, through the doorless entrance.

When I turned from the window, \_\_\_\_\_ was writing in his notebook, his hand curled around almost the whole of the small pad, making an urgent script with movements of his hand so small he could just have been shivering.

Once he had done, he checked his wristwatch, noted what I assumed was the time and then announced that we were leaving, that it was getting too dark to see anything else.

## SECOND DAY IN THE NEW QUARTER, TRAVELLER THROUGH TIME

The next day was the hottest since hell began. But we still got up and walked out into it, this time with more sandwiches and a couple of beers for \_\_\_\_\_. We walked with our jackets over our arms and the sweat made our hats and our shirts sodden.

When we got to the imitation courthouse we'd been watching the day before, \_\_\_\_\_ circled round it, pressing himself into the wall and peering suspiciously through empty window frames at empty rooms, before we went and sat in the building across the road, \_\_\_\_\_ perched on the metal seat by the window, binoculars pressed into his face, me sitting on the ground.

I'd been using my hat to fan myself, and after we'd eaten the sandwiches I stood up to stretch my legs and look for something that might manage the job better.

Behind the tarp I found a magazine, a pulp with the word Astonishing on the cover. The cover showed a cliff and by the edge of it a machine about the size of two cars piled on top of each other. And on the far side of that, his back to you, was a man in a lab coat, waving a fiery torch. And coming at him through this sick yellow fog like Nevada Gas, came a gang of skinny, hairless, naked men, slightly shiny as if they were wet. Naked but with just a smooth curve where a smooth curve doesn't belong. It didn't look like the torch was discouraging them from getting closer to the machine.

It said "Traveller Through Time!"

After a while using the magazine as a fan, I opened it and read the story, because I wasn't being called on to do anything else.

It had Holcomb's name at the top, the kid who sank into a ball when he got a bad hand at poker and just about bust through the ceiling when he had the goods.

After I read it I couldn't make much sense of that picture. There was no cliff-top or torch anywhere in the story. There was a race of almost human creatures, but Holcomb didn't call them like the sweating, bald things in the picture. In fact, he hardly called them at all. It was made to read as if it was written by the Time Traveller and he keeps saying that they were "greatly changed", though he never exactly says that they used to be human, and the only specific thing he describes about them is their hands.

He says their palms are bloated, their hands just puffy balls of meat, with these long fingers with extra joints along them. When they grab, the fingers wrap around objects “like vines,” but they don’t have any strength in them.

I’m telling this badly—it’s best not to mess around the story, I suppose.

It starts with the machine arriving. Wait, that’s not quite right. It starts with there being a strange, “violent” kind of movement like the machine is there, but it’s not. Then the machine is there—in the middle of this empty plain. Well it starts with an empty plain, then the machine arrives—first there’s the violent blur, and then the machine is there and the scientist gets out of it and looks around the “stricken landscape,” though you don’t know at that point that he’s a scientist.

First there’s nothing, just—nothing—and then there’s this movement, this violent—well, first there’s nothing just this “desolate, stricken landscape” and then there’s, firstly there’s the sense of movement, as if “of a candle being observed” but “only at the furthest point to which its flicker reaches, as it is buffeted by an unremitting wind”. And then the machine appears. Well, the machine is part of the movement, part of the blur, and then the scientist, the man, gets out of the machine, only once the blur has settled and the machine has “appeared, both instantly and gradually—as an abrupt shout leaves behind itself a series of echoes that merge and vanish, like ripples after the sinking of the stone,” then the scientist, or the man gets out. And he looks around and he laughs. Then these things appear. He laughs for a long time before that.

First there is a “desolate, stricken landscape”, a “great vastness” and not much else, then there’s this “impression of violent motion in the middle of the plain where previously had been nothing, not even any of the ...” I should have mentioned that in some places on the plain there are “large, dying” shrubs.

There is a “desolate, stricken landscape; large, dying shrubs the single feature, embedded regularly throughout its great absence. In plains roiled by centuries of wind and rain, they were dying in large unmourned patches, shedding grey thorns from their great mangled bodies. Into this forbidding scene, there appeared what would have seemed a most unusual visitation, had there been any attentive eye to witness it. A sudden but lingering blur where before there had been nothing. From nothing a large gray mass appeared, a blur with an outline that was indistinct but unshifting, as though the contents of some unseen division were being agitated by a powerful force.”

This blur, this “mass”, “resolves itself into the shape of a machine, the metal skeleton of a box with a man at its heart.”

After what was neither an age nor a moment, the man climbed unsteadily from his seat in the machine and looked around the landscape without expression—whether of surprise, disgust, horror or delight. He seemed, as a man, the match of the wasteland he stared into. Until his lips parted and a laugh, both joyless and triumphant climbed from him, and kept rising, a bitter witness to the death sentence of a ravaged world. The laugh grew in size, splitting his mouth wider and forcing back his head and growing still. As he leaned on his strange machine, tears now glommed to his gray, crazed eyes and fell in the dust by his feet, already the colour of the dry dirt on which they stood. He fell to his knees and this dirt was thrown against him, into his wet eyes and the crevice of his ceaseless, joyless laughing, and still he laughed on and on, until his voice cracked and gave, and a rasp was all that the landscape swallowed, and a hoarse, broken rasp, and it gave no sign it cared or knew the difference between this and the laugh that came before, swallowing both as completely and unreadably.

Then, as the man’s voice seemed to have passed the final reaches of his strength, another noise arose.

This dull, regular sound came from neither the man nor his contraption. And it gripped the man tight. He seemed for the first time more than the mysterious metal machine that had delivered him. He had become an animal, its senses overwhelmed.

The sound began as if a dismal echo of his laugh, as though the sound of the madman on his knees had been taught to the broken strings of old pianos and to the crushed throats of clarinets, and they compelled to repeat it.

From one of the large plants there came a figure.

Small and grotesque, its mouth wide, emitting the troubling noise, or rather a share of the noise, it advanced on him.

Its appearance adjusted the man’s conception of the plant from which it had emerged. These plants, which everywhere blighted the landscape, and which he had assumed stood no taller than himself, he now understood to be larger than the tallest tree he had ever in the whole of his life encountered. And as he turned towards another, a dozen more figures emerged from it, all the match of the first, all with their mouths open, cruelly imitating his own cruel laugh.

As they advanced their heads turned incessantly from side to side, the creatures surveying each other then turning again to the true man suddenly amongst them, and then away again. And with every steady turn of their heads, they came closer.

While the noise they gave and the movement of their heads was constant and smooth, their gait was quite the opposite: a jerky movement, as though they kept confronting and climbing an obstacle, though it was an obstacle they carried with them in their own godless design.

The man watching their approach was still. If his laughter before had been that of a man who imagined that no horrors were unknown to him, his humanity crawled anew at the sight of these greatly changed creatures. But he had no strength in him to move, or make so much as a noise.

Until a hand clasped his own wrist.

Now he was amid tens of the creatures, and more approached and those nearest him also made to grasp at him. And in the alertness of terror he saw the hand that held his forearm and was appalled.

The palm was a bloated ball, as though swollen with disease, ill fit for any purpose he could imagine, and from this ball of flesh there sprouted fingers that resembled vines more than they did anything human. They were extremely long with a great many points of articulation. The touch was repellent, but still he did nothing. The Time Traveller's eyes moved from the spindled boil of a hand to the dark gawping mouth of the creature, which carried the awful sound into his face on a rotten wind.

And from beside him came the same noise, and his face was blasted by another vulgar breath and another hand wrapped itself around him, between his arm and his side.

More of the creatures now laid hands on the Time Traveller, wrapping the vines of their fingers around each of his legs, and the first to have reached him placed its other around his neck, the uppermost two digits exploring the edge of his mouth.

Gripped by the long fingers of a dozen bulbous hands, abused by the cacophonous, foul sound of a hundred and more hideous voices, the Traveller remained still, only his eyes betraying his terror. It was as if the grip of the cold grey flesh was a horror endured without hope of it ever ending, without duration; he was a prisoner held within an unspeakable moment, bound by wet fingers that tied knots around him like the cold,

hard ropes on the deck of a ship.

Then suddenly the man shrieked back at the wailing creatures. And he tore violently at their hands. And as a glass can draw vibrations from those glasses around it, the piercing shriek spread from his human mouth to their all too different mouths.

As the Traveller clawed and tore at the hands he was unaware of the violence he was doing to the creatures. It was only once he had almost freed himself, when almost all of the creatures' voices had turned to a shriek, that the thought reached him of how weak the grip that held him had been, and how awful the effect of the blows he had thrown to save himself from the mass of creatures that engulfed him.

So tired was he, with a moral tiredness, a tiredness of the mind, that his actions seemed to occur at a distance from him almost as great as the distance he had travelled. When the sights of his own struggle finally reached him, they were of long hard fingers being snapped and torn; hideous faces being split open by each punch as if they were soft, rotted fruit and collapsing on themselves like wet cardboard. So great was the violence exhibited on the creatures the Traveller imagined it a form of psychic terror he exercised against them, the manifestation of his revulsion at the touch of the fat grey hands, which came in the form of their snapping and bleeding, and they withdrew not as the neat binding that had held him had been before but badly frayed and hanging at unbearable angles to one another. His fury at the ugly braying figures introduced new geometric forms into them with great force: one face and then another suddenly dented almost in half, as if struck by a chisel. In this way he made sense of a brutality that seemed impossible from the tired swings and pushes of his limbs, but matched perfectly the vehemence of his will.

Screeching and bleeding, the creatures' heads recoiled, and from the great darkness of its throat, one of the beasts, a monster with half a shattered eye, gurgled sibilantly and sprayed a muddy dart of fluid across the Time Traveller's clothes, then another did the same, until they were all spraying foul liquid across his neck and face and only his eyeglasses prevented it from entering his eyes.

It was this barrage that finally propelled the Time Traveller back towards the machine, which, when he had stepped from it, he could not have conceived of ever entering again. Only this God-forsaken place could force him back into the contraption. This dead earth, with these monstrous creatures slinging venom, with their hard, weak

flesh, the puppet shells that cracked and tore with such ease.

But now, moved by horror, disgust and a care for his own life he had thought lost, the Time Traveller wiped at his spectacles and started the machine.

For a moment, as the edges of the machine began to flicker, he took satisfaction in seeing the creatures nearest to it torn apart, the creature with the half-eye that was staggering and clutching towards him being reduced to a bloody spray.

This was an instant's pleasure.

And then his own body felt as if turned to stone and, for the second time, his own hell began.

Now, beside the machine, specks of dark blood clumped and inexpertly bound themselves with grey flesh into a creature with half an eye that moved as though tugged from behind. The other creatures also retreated, as a low wave after reaching its furthest point slips back into the sea. And now withdrawing with them from the machine came the Time Traveller himself. He watched as his image backed into the creatures and with great, decorative contortions enmeshed itself in a mound of greyness, bound by the clutching monsters.

The Traveller in the machine made to turn away, but his head remained facing the knot of bodies with himself at its centre, remained as the minutes passed and from this mound individual creatures extricated themselves and loped away, their gait even more awkward and ungainly than it had been when time proceeded untampered. And as the world began to retrace its unhurried steps and the creatures moved away it was into a thickening white fog, which fell all around the machine. Until finally nothing at all was visible beyond the confines of the machine, as if the Time Traveller was a caged bird in a stage magician's trick, and a sheet had been laid over him. Disgust animated the mind of the Time Traveller. He forced his arm towards the lever that would halt the machine, knowing that it would be years before it achieved even the slightest movement.

Knowing that, should he blink, he would watch the eclipse form for thousands of years.

Knowing that whatever the extreme sloth of his body that made his glorious invention function, his mind would be conscious of the passing of the years, the millions of years, between this and his own time.

He might have known the exact number of years—from a small change in



darkness he had come to distinguish between, so he imagined, day and night—but at various points in his outward journey madness had robbed him of the figure. And now he waited for madness to come again, the only saint that could reach him in the rigid trap of his own frame. For days, weeks, years and millennia, awake and without reprieve, as his mind sat in solitude for longer than any civilization had ever survived, for longer than the legacy of species, or the formation of rocks, the Traveller's mind sang a song it had written long before the end of its last journey through this frozen hell, and had forgotten and rewritten many times, and had reduced until it was one phrase thought in all the pitches the Traveller was able to conceive it, a childhood phrase told the Time Traveller by his brother as children when they were in play, which was actually combat, in which the older boy had forced him into the ground and, with the conqueror's self-belief which even the boy Time Traveller beneath his heel admired as heroic, said "I am an explorer and all this land is mine forever". And the Time Traveller prayed for madness or death "And all this land is mine forever".

That's how it ended: "all this land is mine forever".

It would have been a better read with more talking in it, but it had still passed the time.

I put the magazine back behind the tarp and walked around the empty box of a room. Then I sat back down on the ground beside \_\_\_\_\_, still pressing his eyes into his binoculars.

I stretched out my arm. The torn seam at the shoulder snarled at me.

The rest of the day died slowly. Nothing happened this time out, not that I saw and not that \_\_\_\_\_ saw through his little binoculars. Not even a bum slinking out to spray the wall.

## **HECTOR COMES TO SEE BOX**

*The first time he goes to Box he goes alone. The first time he can not bring himself to cross the threshold of the room. He stands at the open door.*

*He has been directed here by color (the door frames and waist-height handrail painted to distinguish between the constantly self-mirroring sameness of everything else about the building). Through blue and turn right into red and then before the corner. That's where you'll find the man who killed your daughter and your grandchild.*

*Though of course they don't say that, wouldn't know it. Though he had thought they would, would ask his name, somehow know it and turn him away, tell him to think better of whatever he'd come for, he'd felt an ache for the rejection. No one asked his name. A young man in a smock, same as a half dozen other smocks he saw when he was in blue, a half dozen more in red, told him where to come, where he'd find Box, to his position in the room, as if it was as sure a landmark as a dip in the road or a church on a corner. And there he is: the large back turned to him just as he was told it would be. The large strangeness of the device on his head.*

*This room, like the other rooms he has walked past – those with open doors – has two beds in it, though one of them, he sees, is bare, another metal skeleton like the one clinging to the top of the man at the window. He stands at the door. He realizes he has not been thinking about going in, but rather walking in his head the route of the lie he gave before coming here. Feeling in his legs the steps he'll say he took, filling the walk with detail – a boy with something under his arm being chased by a man on a bicycle. A girl with a tray of ice-packed fish tripping on that uneven paving slab at the top of Jack's block and almost making the whole thing fly. Climbing the tall steps and waiting, waiting impatiently after a while, to hear through the door Jack's shuffle (the memory of the trip that didn't happen mixing with the conversation still in the future, the one he's already preparing for: Didn't you tell him you were coming? I told him—that old fart wouldn't remember his teeth if tobacco came pre-chewed.) Then the way back. Sitting on a bench, the bench next to the Canberts' old place. Watching a young mother distracted by conversation while her small son, must have been less than a year, tried to befriend a small mongrel. He doesn't like that he's been building up the lie, but he likes that it seems real to him. He doesn't want to get caught in it.*

*He looks at Box, tries to see past the strangeness of the device, notice something else. Stains on*

## *Muscle*

*the clothes, ocher colored, dirty, shit colored. The sagging arm holes in the shirt, and the chest within. A curve of flesh—like a nipples nose. Feels improper, embarrassing. Feet exposed, and ankles too – his trousers too short. He can see the gridded face in the mirror, mess of hair, beard overgrowing its trellis, the pipework of the device. He's not there. He's like a bear dead in a trap. In this stack of red rooms, same as the blue and the green and the yellow. In that scaffold around his head, just an empty Box within a box within a box.*

*Nothing remains of whatever brought him here, nothing to make him go in the room or talk to the dead bear. He goes home to lie to the woman he loves.*

## PLAYING POKER, PAID BY THE WORD

That night there was another card game, larger than usual, with seven players. \_\_\_\_\_, Lydia, a Greek barber who lived in the building, an ex-buzzer called Palmer, a few others.

The writer was there, the Astonishing Holcomb.

He made it clear that he'd just been paid, talking about it and then, when that didn't get the acclaim he wanted, taking the money from his pocket and fanning it for us all to admire.

But now he had some money, for the first time he didn't seem to have any interest in losing it. He was making himself comfortable in his chair, sitting out as many hands as he played.

In one hand he folded his cards before the flop, then pulled out from beneath the table a small calfskin case that looked new and opened with a snap. From the case he took some wine glasses, enough for everyone at the table. A red scale curved inside each base, a wine stain. He took a bottle from the case and half-filled the glasses with whisky.

Then he sat back and swirled his glass lazily and started talking. His subject was how much he liked getting paid, and particularly how much he liked getting paid by the word.

He talked about it for a long time. If he meant it to sound like he was someone who made a lot of money, he didn't. It went the other way. If he was a musician he'd have been on knee sweetly serenading a half-dollar up in her bed chamber. But he was a talker.

After he'd spoken for a long time about the various feelings having some money in his pocket gave him, he went quiet for a while, sipping whisky. The whole table was in the kind of silence that comes when nobody's getting the cards they feel like they deserve.

Holcomb had reached the point in his bottle and the evening where his glass butted against his mouth when he lifted it and drops of the whisky slid down his chin, and when he set it on the table more slopped over the side. He said,

"The beautiful thing about being paid by the word is that it supplies us with an

exchange rate between reality and language. Wait, no, that's getting ahead of myself, that is abrupt and ugly, a dull edge. We shouldn't allow dull and brutal things when we speak any more than we would when we write," he said looking at me—I guess because I was the only person still giving him the attention he wanted. I'd been coming and going from the table so I hadn't been as subject to it as everyone else. Now I was sitting in for Lydia, about to fold low suited connectors. I'd left the glass of whisky he'd pushed toward me for her.

Lydia was smoking a black cigarette by the open window looking out at the street. The apartment manager was out and she didn't know where. If anyone at the table knew they were too kind to tell her.

"The beautiful thing about being paid by the word," said Holcomb, "is—well, let's say all my money comes from my writing and all the writing I do is paid by the word. I write for the love pulps mainly. Terrible things, too coy even to have the dignity of the earnestly seedy. Some science fiction too.

"Now obviously you could go through my apartment, and for each of my belongings you could attach a label with the dollar value of that item. I paid this much for the typewriter, this much for the desk, this much for the brandy. Now each word I write I get paid a nickel. Sometimes it's less than that, sometimes it's even a bit more. But let's say a nickel. If you know how many nickels I paid for something you could figure out a word that I've sold the necessary number of times to pay for that thing.

"Now we've got a new set of labels for my belongings. It's not a number and a dollar sign. The scotch is labeled 'suddenly'. The typewriter's got the label 'lusting'. There's plenty of lusting in love pulps. But the desk's even more expensive, so it's labeled with a pronoun maybe, or a conjunction. Perhaps 'because' is enough to buy the desk. I see your 'rugged' and raise you 'wistful'!" he said and threw a couple of chips into the pot, though he'd folded the hand without even looking at his cards. \_\_\_\_\_ gave him a look and the kid pulled them back, being careful not to disturb the pile. Only two players, \_\_\_\_\_ and Palmer, were still in the pot. Palmer had got early retirement from the force when he was photographed selling guns out the back of his prowler car. We'd met him when we had to break his hand over a small debt. They carried on playing. \_\_\_\_\_ called a raise and dealt another card. Holcomb drew on his cigarette with a look of great concentration.

\_\_\_\_\_ took the pot and passed the deck to the man to his left to deal the next hand.

“What’s beautiful about being paid by the word,” said Holcomb, “is that we know exactly what everyone in this room is worth.” He crossed his arms and took another drag on his smoke. “Assuming that they’re worth anything,” he said. He was offered a card and rejected it, and the game carried on without him. I got another bum hand and folded to a low raise.

From the window, Lydia said, “What’s horrible about low-rent writers being paid by the word, is that they feel the need to keep going on even when they’ve run out of things to say.”

“Think about how many words anyone’s going to spend describing you,” Holcomb carried on, looking at her. “Maybe your beau’s composing sonnets instead of at a leg show or haggling prices for a lay. Could be. And maybe Mrs Palmer’s at home right now filling notebooks with beautiful similes, pages and pages of heartfelt whimsy.”

“There ain’t no Mrs Palmer,” said Palmer, though I don’t think Holcomb heard him. “Not presently, leastways.” Lydia smoked her black cigarette and looked out at the empty street however people look at things that don’t mean anything.

I nearly said something to all this, but I couldn’t find the words or the energy. If Lydia had been the kind to take offense I might have worked harder at it.

“Let’s suppose they are! Right this moment—they’re hard at work behind a pile of hitherto unexpressed affection and rhyming dictionaries. Unimportant—it doesn’t matter. What I mean is, how many words would it take to plumb the depths? How many nickels before they, or anyone else who might turn their pen to the task, have scraped bare the walls of the soul they’ve set out to describe?”

To the right of Palmer sat a dog handler. He was a bit less animated than an old Irish Basset that didn’t get excited for much of anything ever since its owners had it put down. All night he’d kept his hat on, the smoke from a stub of a cigar catching and then deflecting on the brim, so it tumbled up like a waterfall upended. The cigar rolled from one side of his mouth to the other and he pushed in half his chips.

The only others left in were me and \_\_\_\_\_. I called, \_\_\_\_\_ folded. Palmer laid another card on the table. The old dog handler didn’t raise his old runny eyes, just pushed in the rest of his chips, worked his cigar with his big jaw. I called, and looked

round to find Lydia had turned from the window and moved toward the game, watching as I doubled her chips, which felt good. When I'd turned my cards to show the droopy hound, I looked round to her and she smiled at me, a small smile like it was something she'd whispered, so just I'd catch it. The dog handler took his jacket from the back of his chair, straightened his hat on his head, nodded to the room and left.

Holcomb watched the door close behind the dog handler. "A paragraph and a half? Maybe two? What's that, 200 words? 5 cents a word gives us five dollars for a hundred words. So ten dollars," he said and turned around to look at Palmer, then Lydia, then at the Greek barber. "How much for this whole room? How much for you, loogan?" he said to me, a loogan being a guy who carries a gun. I stood up and he backed off as if I'd pulled one on him, and Lydia took her seat at the table. Holcomb lighted a cigarette, trying to look casual. "How many words for you, Box?" he said again. I filled my glass at the tap and sat and watched the game for a while longer. I didn't even own a rod. Neither did \_\_\_\_\_.

After he'd quit talking, Holcomb found himself in a room where all there was for him to do was lose money, but still not in a mood to do it. Losing he could do when it made him feel a victim, but the bills in his wallet were too big a cushion for him to be anything but comfortable, at least in a small stakes game like this. And he was all but incapable of winning.

If only he hadn't been so lousy at cards. It must have been bittersweet for him—a writer that easy to read.

I didn't think of that line, that's something someone else used on him once at the table. A good one.

## *AFTER THE APARTMENT MANAGER'S RETURN*

*Box remembers the apartment manager's return. His attention carefully explores the memory, febrile, fluttering and weak, as though too much thought, a clumsy hand, could palm it flat out of existence. He remembers playing poker after the apartment manager's return. It was in the apartment that used to be \_\_\_\_\_'s and was now his. Lydia watched the game but mainly watched the apartment manager, who had reappeared one day, without any explanation, which was, Box had assumed, the absolute best explanation he could give for the time he'd spent away. He had limped home and specifics—names of girls, figures of debts, volumes of liquor—specifics, Box knew, weren't going to help him, so he had done the smart thing and never stopped apologizing and took his licks.*

*Except he told Box much later that there had been no screaming and no punches. Lydia had stayed in her bed, where she had retreated after he had gone, lighted a cigarette, and held it while he apologized and begged and did everything but get down on his knees, and she hadn't so much as moved the cigarette toward her lips once, but let it burn to her knuckles. And she had asked him if he meant it this time, said she couldn't take it, because she couldn't take it even once more. First time I ever knew I was capable of hurting her, he would tell Box. Never thought I was worth that much.*

*There was a week when no one saw them, except when the apartment manager left to buy some food, a week in their room, looking at each other warily. Box imagined them as two dogs padding round each other in the street, uncertain, deciding whether they're interested in fighting or if they can get along.*

*It had taken a long time for the apartment manager to come back to Lydia, but eventually he had, and then it had taken a long time before Lydia told a joke again, or ate a full meal. She didn't burn the apartment manager any more, but she also wouldn't let him finish her stories or share her bed.*

*They played cards, and she sat on the couch and watched him with raw eyes.*

*He would tell Box that for a long time she wouldn't let herself cry when she looked at him, and then there had been a time where she cried constantly. She had continued to get thinner—though Box wouldn't have thought it possible—she carried on smoking black cigarettes, and he had brought her cigarettes and she had smoked them and he had brought her food and she wouldn't eat it, not a full meal, it wouldn't matter what it was, not hamburger with fried onions, not buttered toast. But he had kept trying to make her things he thought she'd like and he had never got angry with her for her anger,*



## *Muscle*

*and he didn't leave again, go back to wherever it was he'd been for the months he'd been gone.*

*At some point, they stopped eyeing each other warily, but they didn't stop locking eyes, and at some point Lydia let him back into her bed, and immediately she was pregnant, though nobody could have expected it to happen.*

*The thought of it brings a smile to Box's face—one of the staff sees it, though he won't be able to make any of the others believe it.*

### THIRD DAY IN THE NEW QUARTER ABANDONED

The next day we walked back into the new quarter, but we were only there for half the day. I reread the story of the Time Traveller in the magazine. When I'd finished, \_\_\_\_\_ had already put away his binoculars, though they hadn't even dented his face yet, and it wasn't long before he was looking as often at his nails as out the window, or then at a coin he played with, turning it in his fingers and using it to bounce the light from the sun into his own eyes. Then he stood up, pushed his hat hard down on his head and stalked for the door, whistling for me to follow.

We went to the fair ground and rode the rides for a while. Then \_\_\_\_\_ folded a fin out of his pocket and gave it to the man by the target range and we shot pellets till even the toy guns got to feeling heavy.

After that we went and bought sandwiches and Coca-Colas from a stall at the rear of the park. We had to wait in line and then, when we were standing in front of a young mother, tired from a day of having a horrible brat kid, \_\_\_\_\_ realized he didn't have any paper money left, and then couldn't find any coins. My pockets were empty. Beneath the wig, the young mother started fuming, till \_\_\_\_\_ found a roll of dimes in his pocket he kept to use instead of knucks if the opportunity presented itself. He peeled open the roll and flicked the dimes one by one across the counter and we sat and ate and drank.

We each ate half a sandwich then we swapped, washing them down with the Cokes. When I'd finished I asked \_\_\_\_\_ what we were going to do now. He said we were going to ride the rollercoaster and then he was going to go and pick up a woman and I could find someplace else to spend the night, and that's what we did.

## HOUSE PEEPER

There had been a few nights since I'd been staying on the mattress by \_\_\_\_\_'s bed that I'd not slept in the apartment. One night I'd sat in Lydia's apartment, listening to her talk while she drank gin until she fell asleep and then I walked around town, getting my feet wet in gutters and enjoying the empty streets. But the apartment manager still wasn't back and I didn't expect Lydia to be in a mood to drink gin and tell jokes. Instead I went to a hotel, the New Europe, where I knew the house peeper on the night shift. In exchange for some company he would let me use one of the empty rooms, as long as I left it as I found it and I was gone before the end of his shift.

We sat in the radio room and listened to music. My peeper friend was in an armchair, looking like someone had just used him to mop up a spill and had only half wrung him out. He looked a lot shorter than he used to. We'd been in a bar once where he'd won a bet that he could lift me off the ground for 30 seconds—I was allowed to fight it but not with my arms or legs. He'd struggled but he'd managed it, and there are plenty police wagons that wouldn't. As some piano played through the radio he told me that when he'd taken the night shift in the hotel he'd thought it might take him a while to adjust. He spent the first two weeks where every thought he had, there was always another thought behind it: he mimed playing the piano and said "Whatever was going on up here," and he twirled the fingers on his right hand, "down here" and he did the same way over with the left, "there was always this thought: *I am earthly tired, yes sir.*" And then after a couple of months he had realized that he had never stopped being tired, that those chords were there, he had just stopped hearing them. Now it had been three years, and every day he was more tired.

A few hours later I helped him carry a drunk—who had thrown a bottle of scotch against his wall and then passed out, his breathing irregular—across the street into an alley. I found a blanket behind an empty vegetable crate and we laid it over him and went back to the radio room. If his breathing went from irregular to stopped it wouldn't be good for it to happen in the hotel.

The house peeper sat back in his armchair, lit his pipe and shook out the match.

Piano music continued tinnily from behind the lit panel of the radio. He sighed with all the grandness of a stately death.

“You hear that?” he asked, and his left hand played its keys in the air.

A while later I went and lay on top of the sheets in one of the unused rooms.

When I got to the apartment the next day after breakfast, \_\_\_\_\_ was pulling on a tie. He said Jarecki had told him he didn’t have to go back to the new quarter, and he’d told him that we’d done good work.

## **LYDIA PREGNANT**

*As soon as she was pregnant, Lydia's worrying had seemed to vanish and the apartment manager's to begin. All the wariness left her, and Box never again saw her look at the apartment manager as though she was already thinking how it would feel the next time she found him gone. She grew merry all over and round in the middle, and the apartment manager had worried, because she was old to be going through all that being pregnant puts a woman through, and too skinny too, and he had lifted her feet for her and laid them on stools and he had brought her food and she'd eat it and smile at him with all the calm of an endless field of cattle all comfortably doped.*

*As his wife's belly had ballooned out, the apartment manager told Box he thought his chest was always about to cave in. He developed a habit of biting his nails to the quick, and when he smiled at her, he smiled weakly, with all his courage and all his fears for her in his eyes.*

*Box couldn't find anything to say that might comfort him. He was right that it was going to be tough on her, and Box thought that he was doing all he could and all you could do was hope and bite your nails. The apartment manager would still come and fix Box's radiator or replace a lock, even if he didn't come over to talk or play a game of cards. He didn't start missing rent days, or forget how to joke or curse, but he did it all from the far side of his concern, which was big as a continent, bigger than anything he'd had to bear before.*

*Their son came without incident, to the great relief of the apartment manager. Lydia had been serene throughout the whole ordeal by all accounts, though it might just be that by then Box and everyone else could hardly think of her any other way, so they told each other that she had been serene throughout, because to think otherwise would be to look at a lake and think it might boil.*

*Box watched their love growing and it was something to see. It grew with their new son, over the top of his head, and spilled down onto him, he was a boy raised in a continual showering of excess love. He'd thought how remarkable it was that they took to it so easily. Much later it would make him think that perhaps he would take to it just as easily, and would be wrong. But Lydia and the apartment manager, pieced together in perfect alignment, they somehow made a machine specially built for the task, and both were capable of wrapping their tiny son in cloth like it was a card trick, and then once he had dirtied it, they'd both be ready to clean, boil and dry his wrapping, both always ready to feed*

## *Muscle*

*and entertain him. Box would come home to see the three of them sitting on the steps, counting cars together.*

## NO JOBS, TRIPLETS WITH A SCAM

I asked what we were going to do. \_\_\_\_\_ said we were going to go ask Jarecki if he had any more work for us. And if he didn't we were going to go knock over a bank or ask Danskin if he had any work for us, or play cards.

Jarecki had no work for us. \_\_\_\_\_ came out of the back room at his club in a dark mood. Instead of cards we went to a bar, a second floor dive without carpets, comfort or much in the way of custom. \_\_\_\_\_ bought a pint of bourbon at the bar and drank it with the sort of grim determination people on the decline do the work that they're known for. I drank water at the bar and wondered if there was any point in being there.

A few hours later, \_\_\_\_\_ had got into conversation with three young men. They must have been brothers. Each of them was scrawny and red haired and they spoke in a vicious whisper that seemed to come out of all three of them at the same time. After a while \_\_\_\_\_ called me over and introduced me and told me that they had a plan for us to earn some money. I shook hands with the three of them in turn, or with one of them three times, it was hard to tell, their hands slipped in and out of my grip, and they explained in their shared harsh whisper their plan.

It would work, and even if it didn't there was no risk to \_\_\_\_\_ or me, and it appealed to the spirit of the day, so \_\_\_\_\_ agreed for us. For a while they whispered at each other about where we could find the best crowd, and they settled on a tourist hangout in the center of town. \_\_\_\_\_ and I would be two strangers getting into a fight. Once we had a big enough crowd interested in us, the three red-haired brothers would be going through their pockets. Afterwards, we'd come back to the second floor and divide up the money.

It was the sort of scam \_\_\_\_\_ often didn't have any time for, but it looked better than boredom. The triplets wanted to stay and work some more on the pint of bourbon, but \_\_\_\_\_ was so keen to get started he pushed the cork in the bottle and the bottle into his jacket and was out the door with his hat on his head while they were still hopefully holding their glasses out to his seat.

We took the streetcar out near a big theatre that brought in the crowds in droves. Unfortunately, it already had for the evening. Now the show had started and they were inside, out of reach. The most business we could find was outside of a hotel, where hacks stopped to collect rich tourists and a couple of newspaper stands had a few customers flicking through the evening edition. The triplets thought we should go and share the pint of bourbon for a while, wait for things to pick up, come back when the show closed, but \_\_\_\_\_ wasn't in a mood to wait. He told me to go and stand on the other side of the street.

I went over to the bigger newsstand. However it was I looked, apparently it wasn't casual. A gent taking his pipe out for a walk gave me a sidelong glance, twitched the pipe with alarm, then remembered an appointment he had not to be around. The newsy asked me if I was looking for anything.

I tried having my hands in my pockets but when that didn't feel right I flicked through a copy of the same magazine Holcomb's Time Traveller story had been in. The cover for this one had a small green alien boarding a streetcar, having to stand on the tips of his spaceboots to pay the driver for the ride. No one in the peaceful city scene around the green man seemed surprised by him in his big bulb of a glass helmet. Apparently gents with pipes have other things to worry about. Near the back of the magazine I found a story with Holcomb's name, though it was smaller than it had been the time before and it wasn't anything to do with the picture on the cover.

The newsy asked if I was going to buy the magazine, and I was reaching in my pocket for the money when suddenly \_\_\_\_\_ had managed to fall over my legs and was accusing me of tripping him.

It might have made a better show if I had tried to reason with him, but I know what \_\_\_\_\_'s like, so instead of wasting time I took a swing at him with my right. \_\_\_\_\_'s quick: he managed to dodge it, apart from a swipe with the end of the curled magazine across the jaw. Then as I was beginning to throw out my other arm at him, he got in under it and lifted his knee into my side. He was trying to hit me above the hip, where it might have hurt me, but I was too tall for it. Once he'd done I swiped him with the back of my left hand. It brought color into his cheek and I would have given him a line about his pretty blushes, but I wouldn't have got the words in time and anyway he



popped me in the jaw so hard it nearly put the skids under me.

That cinched the notion that I didn't want \_\_\_\_\_ hitting me any more.

I grabbed his jacket back and off his shoulder with one hand so he staggered and the jacket would hinder his arms, and tried to put the boot into the back of his legs and knock at his neck or his face to get him on the ground. He went down on one knee, but he had his arm up to block the punch to his neck. And he pushed himself forward, throwing his weight into my legs and pinning them together.

As my head hit the sidewalk I thought I saw a copper through the legs of the crowd we'd drawn, walking off with a smile on his face. That was the sort of casual I had wanted to be—the casual of a policeman walking away from a brawl in the street. Then \_\_\_\_\_ fell on me with fists and a sharp knee.

The racket was that we would be pulled apart—the decent onlookers of this good city would intervene. This was to be a part of the spectacle we would be creating while the bleak triplets worked their way through the crowd. But we were going at it too good for anyone to want to step in.

As \_\_\_\_\_ started to beat my face, I was aware of the crowd swaying: people at the back keen to see what was going on and the people who could see not wanting to get too close to it.

It seemed a better idea that I slug \_\_\_\_\_ until he passed out than that he slugged me until I passed out. Apart from anything else, I would in all likelihood lay off \_\_\_\_\_ once he was out and I couldn't be completely sure of the same courtesy from him. So I managed to throw him back away from me and had just caught him with one fairly good fist above his right eye when he was being pulled away from me.

The figure holding his left arm said to me, "Woah." The same figure holding his right, said "Patty. Lay off."

I took a couple more small steps in their direction, trying to keep the ground from squirming out from under me. The crowd swayed, and so did the sky and the faces of the matching pair on either side of \_\_\_\_\_. Dogs looked on but they didn't bark.

I found my feet. No one was trying to hold me back. \_\_\_\_\_ wasn't fighting against the two red ghouls holding him. I thought there was maybe blood on my face but I put my hand on it and as far as I could tell it was just sweat. My eye hurt. I turned around and walked away. I didn't even notice I'd somehow managed to move the

magazine into my jacket pocket.

Somehow the four of them made it back to the second floor dive bar before me. Maybe it was the limp that had started after a block or two, or that I got a bit lost after the headache began in earnest. They had wallets and money clips spread out on the table in front of them. \_\_\_\_\_ looked happier than he'd looked in weeks. His lip was split open on one side. His forehead had a pretty good lump on it. I drank a glass of water and stopped thinking about my head and rusty nails and shards of glass and vicious teeth. It didn't help.

The triplets weren't in as good a mood as \_\_\_\_\_. They were complaining to him about the haul, saying they would have made more if we'd waited, and that the fight had been too much. The same mouth made each complaint three times from different seats. They complained that they had to separate us, so we'd all been seen together.

\_\_\_\_\_ shouted at them that what did they care when you couldn't have picked one of them out of a line-up that only had the three of them in it, but he couldn't stop grinning.

They whined some more, hoping for a bigger cut of the money. Whether \_\_\_\_\_ figured that was what they were hoping for I don't know. I was sure they'd already taken one anyway.

The barman brought over another pint of bourbon and \_\_\_\_\_ paid and tipped him from one of the clips on the table. He took it like it was innocent as mother's milk.

When the joint closed all five of us landed up back in the apartment. Immediately \_\_\_\_\_ collapsed in his bed, but for what felt like an age I had to play a tiring game. One of the three pickpockets was sprawled over my mattress and I had to lift him by the scruff of the neck and the back of his belt and put him out the way in a corner of the room. Except, when I came back another one was in the same place, and I had to grab him and toss him through to the other room. And then the same with the third one, or with one of the first two all over again.

When I finally got down on the mattress I thought my dreams would be full of scrawny redheaded pickpockets I'd keep having to move and re-move, filling closets with them, building dams, finding them among the pipes beneath sinks and hidden in

## *Muscle*

hollow curtain rails, and sewn into the back of chairs.

But if I had any dreams no one was writing them down.

## *THE SON AS A YOUNG KNIFE*

*Lydia and the apartment manager's son had started wearing a tie and carrying a knife, and the knife in particular suited him down to the ground, Box remembers thinking, the way a bullet suits a gun. Box had helped the son get a job working for Bernard, and the son got to carry his knife with him and flash his knife and probably make lurid threats and split the odd mark from lip to ear. He certainly got to the way he told Box about it when they played cards.*

*And he got to make a bit of money and he would use it to buy bottles of gin and sometimes after he had drunk them he would throw them at his parents, who he hated, and the only reason Lydia and the apartment manager didn't hate him back was because they loved him so much.*

*Box remembers one time he had been playing cards with the son, and Childs, and a friend of Childs' whose job was chasing vagrants from derelict buildings. The friend told Box that he did this at the behest of the owners, who were happy to have their derelict buildings rot a neighborhood from the inside out, but not happy with the idea of a bum sleeping out of the rain for a night or two. He explained that he'd figured out a new way of doing business and business was booming. He just had to advance the bums a fraction of the eviction fee to get them to move in, then alert the owners and with prepaid cooperation move them right back out. Childs had said how the whole thing was in the best capitalist tradition and Box had laughed and used the general exuberance to push a raise on the son. Things had not at the time been good with Evelyn, but Box was enjoying not talking about her, and the others were enjoying not hearing about her.*

*The apartment manager had come in and asked if anyone minded if he joined the game. Childs brought over a chair and the son grimaced, as he always grimaced when the apartment manager joined one of these games of cards, which he only ever did now to get to sit with his son, and in return all he would ever get was the same grimace and a lot of abuse. Childs dealt the apartment manager in but the son announced he had somewhere better to be, somewhere he couldn't feel breath on his neck, and he left, almost tipping his chair as he went.*

*Childs held the cards out in his one hand, waiting for the apartment manager before he carried on dealing, expecting, like Box expected, that the apartment manager wouldn't stay now that his son had left, but he said, No, go on, deal them. I'm in.*

*And it hadn't taken long for the mood to recover. After a while, Box told the apartment manager*

*that it was good to be playing cards with him instead of his boiled prick of a son, and the apartment manager laughed, and said he had come up because Lydia had asked him to, but it was good to play cards again. I love him, he said. You can't not love them, but I don't love him like she loves him. And as they played cards the apartment manager had kept talking: about his limp, about the war, about his prick of a son.*

*The war upsets your expectations. It makes you think of life one way and then for the rest of it that's not how life is going to be. It's not going to be so, you know, breakable, but it's also not going to be so solid, so real. You come back from the war, and you feel like you're only using so much of yourself, even if you're one of the lucky guys who brought the whole of yourself back with you, he said, nodding at Childs.*

*There's a whole level of experience, of intensity I guess is the word—awful, sure, but also the most living I ever done. For women, including my wife, God love her, that's how it is with children. Women start that experience with the most terrible abuse—suffering you wouldn't even consider inflicting on your worst enemy in war. The first thing is that their moods aren't theirs anymore. That's what that stuff used to do to me, he pointed at the glass in Box's hand, and that was the worst it did to me. That's what it did to send me away from what I care about and stick me between the legs of trouble. What cards did to me once too, I suppose. Maybe Lydia suffered so much from me that she didn't suffer so much with him, she'd already made it through worse. Other women though—friends of hers, younger than her, they come round, she never used to have friends round but now she does. They're so much further than we were at that age, better, but god you still worry about them—they suffer, every kind of trauma to a body you can think of and worse just to get the kid out of them. And then they've got years more struggling just to take care of them, because now the most precious part of yourself is off. With a mind of its own, a head full of its own mistakes it can't wait to make, and it doesn't want you trying to keep it safe. The men went to war, the women had the children. Look at what we've got to show for it. This fucking limp, that ungrateful brat. A handful of stories each.*

*He shrugged. It used to get to me. I used to curse out my leg, I used to curse out my parents and my rotten luck, but it's been feeling better for a long time now, or it's still the same as it ever was, the luck's as rotten as ever, but now how I am with it is better, how she is with it is better. And how the two of us are with each other is better. Everyone's tired, we're all tired, but some of us are loved too.*

## A FAVOUR, NOT FROM JARECKI

Anyone we had ever done a favour for we visited. And as we trailed from place to place, the three pickpockets trailed at our heels. I could hear their hissed whispering. Wherever we stopped \_\_\_\_\_ made them stay outside and I'd take a couple of half-hearted kicks at them, but they were always there waiting for us when we came back out.

We went to a pool hall prop called Moose, who'd arranged to have us in his joint when he'd thought there was some trouble coming his way, and hadn't been wrong about that.

We went to a pawnshop belonging to a little Chinese who'd had the better half of his stock of necklaces replaced with dummies in a heist he hadn't noticed for a full week. The police had got the pearls back for him, but not the satisfaction he'd wanted or the confidence it wasn't going to happen again, so he'd paid us to visit the crooks who'd lifted the necklaces. And, for good measure, the forger who'd fixed up the ringers for them, to make sure he thought more carefully about who he was doing business with in future.

We even went to a louse snow peddler who'd once needed us to scare off another louse snow peddler who was edging into his territory.

No one had any work for us. This was friendship in the city, this was fellow feeling. There was no one you could rely on when you needed a way to fill the days.

We visited Jarecki's last.

The club was open but it was early and the main room was empty apart from a private bridge game in the corner. The pickpockets scurried around a deserted game wheel, one of them spinning it while the other two mimed gambling.

\_\_\_\_\_ ignored them and spoke to the lookout, who walked us to the back room. I stood outside the door and waited.

Inside I could hear \_\_\_\_\_'s raised voice. After a while a waitress took two brandies into the room on a tray. As she opened the door, more of \_\_\_\_\_'s shouting escaped,

like an angry wind let into a cold house. When she returned her tray was wet and held one of the glasses, only now it was half the height, topped with a mountain range of glass, like a piece of art. Her face didn't say much. I carried on waiting.

Bernard came up to me, his nose now entirely without bandages. He tapped it with a finger and winked at me. He was in a good mood—his face looked like a plate of meat in an advertisement painting, a hearty breakfast lit by a big orange sun. He explained that the lookout had told him we were around, and offered me a cigarette. I took it and we stood like sentries either side of the door. The triplets were chasing each other with the rake from the roulette table.

Bernard said that if we were looking for work, he could give us the name of a debt. It was off club books—something that was owed direct to him, but which he didn't currently have the time to pursue. We would just have to put the scare into the debtor.

I said we'd be happy to. He gave me the name and the address then finished his cigarette, ground it out in the ashtray by the door, nodded and left.

\_\_\_\_\_ came out in a dark mood. Even when I told him about the job there was a part of him that didn't want to enjoy it, because it had come from Bernard, and to me.

As we left the redheaded triplets had started their own bridge game. One of them was leaning toward the other table trying to overhear enough to guess the rules and then relaying them to the other two in a way that best benefited him. They were betting the money they'd made the day before clearing out pockets.

## CAIN, AND HIS EAR

First we tried the front door. Cain was the name we were looking for and it was listed as the basement apartment. There was no answer. There was an office where we could have enquired but we wouldn't have wanted to trouble anyone. \_\_\_\_\_ sized up the building then we walked around the side.

We had to climb a wall. \_\_\_\_\_ had me make a ledge with my hands and help hoist him over. Then I found a trashcan and did the same using it.

The back of the building was more promising. \_\_\_\_\_ lifted up a grate and dropped in beside some small half moon windows that looked into the basement apartment. He took off his homburg but then returned it to his head and told me to pass him my fedora. He put his hand inside the hat and punched a hole in the window, then traced the frame to get rid of the rest of the glass. He shook the hat and handed it back to me. Then he pushed his legs in the window and hoisted himself forward with his arms so he dropped down inside the apartment.

I was pretty convinced my shoes would fit through the window. I wasn't so sure about the rest of me. Still I climbed into the trough and fit the grill back in place over my head, and started measuring myself with a small half moon-shaped window. I had to hold my arms straight above my head and slip into the room like that. It didn't do my back much good, being bent out of shape and raked by the bottom of the window frame, and my mood wasn't in great shape either by the time I reached the floor, my feet crunching on glass, my mitts high, like I was surrendering to an empty room and \_\_\_\_\_'s grin.

I gave my shoulders a spin just to make sure I still could and \_\_\_\_\_ came over and took my hat off my head. He brushed some more glass from it and handed it back.

After we had given the apartment a once over, \_\_\_\_\_ dragged over a high-backed chair and arranged it facing the door.

\_\_\_\_\_ told me what we were going to do to Cain. He said that we could just beat him or break his hand, and that would, doubtless, be enough to motivate him to pay his debts. I started to say that we'd beaten plenty of people, and broken enough



hands and thumbs, but he interrupted, agreeing. This was why we'd always made a good team, because we understood each other, \_\_\_\_\_ said. He flipped out his butterfly knife and said that when Cain appeared we would take him and cut off his ear, and he made a slicing motion with the knife. I thought it over and had to admit that I couldn't remember us ever having cut off someone's ear.

\_\_\_\_\_ sat in the chair, where he'd be the first thing Cain would see when he walked in. I would be standing behind the door, hidden from view. So I stood behind the door, and we waited.

It took some time for me to feel my legs beginning to lock into place. I stayed still, and watched \_\_\_\_\_ sitting in his chair, watching the door.

Looking at him I started to think of the Time Traveller in Holcomb's story sitting frozen. I thought about \_\_\_\_\_, whose eyes never left the door, sitting in the machine while the days passed around him, and how it would look if the sun came up on him still in the chair, and then night came again, and then day.

I wondered how long we would wait if we had to, whether \_\_\_\_\_ would still stare at the closed door through another day if the sun came up and the door still hadn't opened and Cain still hadn't returned. I guessed that we probably would—this was the only job we had been given to do.

It had got so dark I could barely see \_\_\_\_\_—just his outline, just. I had lost all the feeling in my legs from standing still—I was half a person. I thought that I'd not looked at the magazine I'd taken from the newspaper stand. We waited.

When Cain opened the door and entered the room, he was lit from the corridor. He was a large man, tall with long arms that hung from wide shoulders with an aspect of weighted force, like a piece of prospecting machinery. He stood facing the strange figure sitting in his shadow and his chair.

I swung the door shut behind him and the light slid away like it sensed trouble. The last thing it showed was his face turned to me, a good-natured face trying to figure out what joke we were playing on him. Then the darkness had crossed him and the three of us sunk to the bottom of it. He was the kid who can only scare away monsters for as long as the light's still on—only we were there for Cain in the light, and when it

was gone he must have stood in the darkness almost prepared to believe we went with it.

I grabbed at his arms and as I did it I had to take a step forward and felt inclined to fall over my sore legs. Maybe I felt like one of the lurching grey creatures in the story. I lifted my knee into his back as hard and high as it could go. It wasn't much of either but with a push from my arms which hadn't managed to get much of a purchase around him it was enough that it drove Cain forward, into \_\_\_\_\_, even though \_\_\_\_\_ hadn't had the time to be anywhere but sitting in the chair. In a way I couldn't see \_\_\_\_\_'s hands took the wind out of the tall man, and then helped lower him to the ground, folding the machine of him down and in on itself.

As I turned the light on, \_\_\_\_\_ dragged Cain into the chair. He pushed back his forehead, his hair was cropped too close to grab, and gave him a couple of slaps around the face. He told him to pay attention and, as he put his hand toward his pocket to get the knife, I saw Cain and what remained of his ear clearly.

He was unbalanced when it came to ears. The left was as it should have been. But beneath the deep hollow of the right there was a mound of flesh like drooping wax that ended in an earlobe, and above it there was nothing.

\_\_\_\_\_ had seen it too and looked less disappointed than surprised. He held the knife down by his side and looked at the half an ear. It was peculiar. We'd decided to do something, and here it was already done for us. \_\_\_\_\_ pressed a finger at the side of Cain's head, as though he was seeing if it would hurt him. It didn't seem to. His head bent away from the pressure, but he didn't wince.

\_\_\_\_\_ took his cigarettes from his pocket and lighted one as he inspected the missing ear. He held the little knife in his hand and looked at the mess of flesh.

Cain looked at us both from the chair. He rubbed at the base of his back. His good-natured face went from \_\_\_\_\_ to me and back, and forth. He looked awake. He looked keen to find something to feel good-natured about. \_\_\_\_\_ drew on his smoke and told him to sing out. And when Cain's face again turned to me, for explanation \_\_\_\_\_ pushed his finger back into the grisly red where Cain's ear wasn't. The top of the half-ear was lined with darkness that mottled and sent chubby wisps of black into the remaining pink flesh. And in the red outline of the whole ear—from when it had been whole—there was a gallows, a sickly yellow colour.

Cain started to say something about money, and \_\_\_\_\_ said “Nix” and prodded the ear again, “Tell us this story.”

When Cain told it, it was from that place that we keep the stories we’ve heard ourselves tell so many times we don’t see anything behind the words any more. When the words are just shapes that we remember having previously constructed the thing we are now required to make, when laid out in a certain way. He said how he’d been an iceman since he was seventeen, carrying ice on his shoulder wrapped in a sackcloth. He’d wear a wool shirt and a leather vest and the sackcloth would go around the ice. Except one day, not long after he started carrying ice, so he was still probably seventeen at the time, maybe eighteen, he forgot to take his sackcloth with him, and he was already slow doing his round so he couldn’t go and get it.

He found another wool shirt, and draped that across his head and shoulder to give him some cover for the ice, and didn’t even notice how cold he had become. He said that you were always cold carrying ice—probably the first thing he should have noticed was how quickly his head stopped feeling cold, numbed. And he said that at the end of the his route the ear was yellow and when he touched it felt like it would have been happy coming clean off, if he’d been able to get a grip on it. It felt so wet, like he was reaching his hand into a bucket of ice water with an ear sat in the bottom, not something attached to a head, certainly not to his head. And then the ear blackened and hardened, and well, most of it came off.

Cain gestured with his hands, like he was sorry his story didn’t have much of an ending. \_\_\_\_\_ didn’t say anything, just leaned down toward him, putting his hands on the chair’s armrests, and kept leaning, so far forward that Cain pressed himself into the back of the chair and had to turn his head to the side, leaving \_\_\_\_\_ staring at the missing ear from just inches away, which he did. He didn’t rush. There was no rush for us, not with our job already done.

Then \_\_\_\_\_ pushed the flat of his hand into Cain’s head, pinning it to the chair, and raised his knife. Cain watched it like there was fishing line from his eye to the edge of the blade. When it had almost reached him, his body threatened to make a move, and \_\_\_\_\_’s hand widened and pushed him more firmly back. \_\_\_\_\_’s knife touched the half ear, and slid slowly, deliberately along and down its blackened edge, tracing it like a barber delicately shaving a well-liked customer’s neck. Then, more quickly, \_\_\_\_\_

## *Muscle*

pulled it away. And with a flick of his hand the blade vanished into its handle, the knife flapped away like an insect. And he let go of Cain's head and stood back.

Cain moved only very slowly to lift his head from the chair, not sure what to expect. \_\_\_\_\_ turned to me, and I didn't know what to tell him. I shrugged, \_\_\_\_\_ said "Pay" to Cain, and we walked to the door of the apartment.

## ALIENS, A NEW TIME TRAVELLER

The next day we did nothing. I wanted to sleep. I'd never felt so tired. It was like I'd been hanging on a clothesline for weeks and my body ached with it.

It was evening by the time \_\_\_\_\_ came in and shook me by the shoulder. I pretended to sleep through it. I wanted to be asleep. \_\_\_\_\_ left the apartment. I wanted to be asleep so badly but wanting it wasn't enough, it would have taken some improvement in me. Sleep was a capacity that other, better people had but I lacked. I went and cleaned myself. I threw water over my face and rubbed it dry with a towel, pressed more water into my eyes. I opened all the windows, standing by one and enjoying the chill, letting the rain come in and wet my bare feet.

Then I lay back down on the mattress and watched the ceiling. It had a couple of dark stains. Enough wrong with it to look a little interesting—malevolent, maybe—but still, it could only bear so much attention.

I dragged my coat from a chair without standing and took the new magazine from the pocket. First I read the story that had the picture on the cover, with the small alien boarding a streetcar.

It was about friendly little green men landing and living on earth as tourists. Everyone's happy to have them because they pay their way and they don't get under anyone's feet, but then they start getting interested in strange shows. A group of them go and watch them give a guy the chair, taking pictures during and clapping politely once they're done burning him. Then they start crowding round whenever there's a car accident. And soon this is all they're interested in. Suicides jumping from windows, knife fights outside gin joints, mishaps on building sites. Then a group of big shots—the chief of police, the mayor of some city, some captains of industry—are all gathered together, talking it through in an office high over a city where fires burn. They start saying how maybe there are more car crashes than there used to be, and more suicides and more knife fights too, but before they've even got this straight they start getting sour with each other and an argument breaks out. One of them starts bitching to himself about his lousy family while he knocks back whiskey and gives the ground the

evil eye, the rest poke each other in the chest and raise their voices. And finally they start throwing fists. The chief of police pounds a captain of industry to pieces on the corner of his desk. The mayor grabs an official mayoral letter opener and slices his own secretary through the stomach, then takes one in the chest from a revolver that another captain of industry has pulled out his sock. The unhappy family man breaks a bottle and uses it to tear out his own wrists, then finishes the job by throwing himself through the window. And outside there's a floating group of little green men, taking pictures and clapping.

It was a pretty good one.

Then I read Holcomb's story.

It was shorter than his other story, the one about the creatures, but not as short as it could have been. There were maybe two bits in the whole story that you needed, the rest was dead weight.

The story was about a scientist, and Holcomb spent his time telling you how good looking the scientist is, and how brilliant. The scientist goes to meet a friend of his, a knockout frail who's obviously hung up on him, except he's so distracted by being brilliant he doesn't even notice it. And she's not the only one. Even on the way to meet her he's setting hearts on fire—there's a girl who sells cigarettes and another one who doesn't do anything but fall in love with scientists on the far sidewalk. The guy is a hymnal for every woman who lays eyes on him, but he's only interested in the machine he's working on.

Eventually Holcomb gets round to putting him in his machine.

The machine sounds a lot like the machine in the other story—it's a metal cage the scientist has to climb inside, and it flickers when it gets turned on, only this time there's no sitting frozen in the seat, or grey, spitting creatures, or anything else like that. This time the scientist is almost afraid of the machine and what it might do. He hasn't tried it yet—I guess because he's been too busy ignoring frails, but also because he has no way of knowing if it's safe. Only now he's had this idea for checking if it will work, and once he's done that, he's going to turn it on.

This is starting to take almost as long as Holcomb made it. What's important is the way he has of making sure his machine is safe includes a switch like a little metal hammer, and he can move the head of this hammer as a signal. Also, he's never before

been worried about dying, but now that he's got this machine he could be "the single most important figure in the world—the world of the past and of the future, as much as of the world he felt fairly sure was still outside his window", and also he seems to think that anything that goes wrong might not just be the end of him, but of a lot else too. This is all why he's cautious about starting the machine. That's the take of it all, out of a lot of talking about his childhood, and how the machine's meant to work and how the blue of his eyes catches the light.

After all that the "scientist climbed into the machine", and he "steadied his resolve" and he "placed his hand on the lever that might change the world, or ruin it."

And he waited for a sign, with a certainty in his waiting that no spiritual man had ever achieved. With a stomach-less, throat-less peace he waited, and as it threatened to become almost unbearable, a dark ball of unease growing within his head almost beyond the capacity of his skull to contain it, the signal he had been waiting for arrived, an advance party's cry that it was safe to proceed: the small hammer slid to the left with a small but uncanny certainty. He found himself pulling on the lever with the same mechanized resolve.

The machine that encased him buzzed, and seemed almost to flicker, as though the world had something in its eye and was blinking this thing that should have been real and steadfast in and out of existence.

And then it was over. And he sat in the same seat, in the same room. But everything was changed.

It turns out, he's now travelled about a couple of hours into the future. Several clocks he has in the room show that he has, including clocks that work by dripping water or trickling sand. Still Holcomb spends a lot of time convincing the guy that he has. The thing that makes him buy it, convinces him he isn't being rooked, is that through the window he can see it's now dark, when it wasn't before. He's happy about this, at length.

The one thing he doesn't think of is, maybe the machine just made him pass out for a couple of hours and all he's invented is a blackjack the size of a cigarette stand. But he hasn't, anyway. He's the first time traveller. He carries on being happy about this.

Then he remembers the hammer, the signal. He reaches for the hammer, which unlike the rest of the machine is still flickering. This is the second bit of the story that

it seems worth keeping.

He reached to the hammer to move it to the left. This was his plan; this, in a sense, he had already done. Moving the hammer now, at any time in the next hour or more, he had calculated, would cause—had, in fact, caused—the hammer to move on the machine in the past, where he sat waiting to begin his journey. The machine had taken him into the future; this hammer was capable of operating into the past.

This was the signal, and also a proof. It showed that the scientist's success was two-fold, he had taken the reins of time and he could steer it backwards with all the ease with which he had driven it forward; and it would alert him before he even did so, before he operated the machine for the first time, that his attempt would be a success, and a safe success at that. When he saw the movement of the hammer in that other time he would, he knew, because he remembered, mechanically pull at the lever and journey forward.

But still as he reached for the hammer, he hesitated (had he hesitated before?) and considered, with a flush of compassion or selfishness, what it would mean for the scientist that had been him, now sitting two hours in the past, holding on to the lever, waiting for the hammer to move.

He would see the signal and launch himself forward, into—well into what exactly? Launch himself forward in time, and *into* the scientist now sitting with tentative hand outreached to give the signal.

And wouldn't that be a kind of death? Not as grand or important a death as he had been contemplating before, not the death of the only person to have challenged the strictness of the beat to which time, relentless, marched. But the death of someone to whom he felt a more than familial closeness: a strange kind of suicide.

If he left the hammer untouched and the signal ungiven, then soon there would be two of him: *one who propelled himself forward, and another who allowed the current simply to carry him.*

If he gave the signal, however, well, then these would be confounded together and there would remain only one.

His hand withdrew. The eerie flicker of the hammer subsided and passed.

Unsure whether to leave, to hide, to stay: he waited.



He noticed, in the bed, in the corner of the small room, a figure he recognized, sleeping restlessly.

It felt to me like the story had ended immediately Holcomb had written as many words as the magazine would give him nickels for, and never mind that so many of the words he'd written had been about the wrong things. Or as if the story had just ended when it hit the edge of the page.

My body had run out of patience for lying down. It ached and itched where it touched the mattress at the foot of \_\_\_\_\_'s bed. Something was going to have to change.

### **BOX AWAKE AGAIN, ONE WAY TO CONCEIVE OF TIME**

*There is an interruption. It brings the flush, and then the disappointment. It feels like waking, like creation. From a period in which there are no thoughts, he is born, with the opening of the door and the entrance of a young man in a smock. It is an awakening, a creation, a disappointment, and then he has to unmake himself again. To sleep. He looks out the window and waits for his thoughts to disperse; they bring him a memory, a passage he once found in one of Holcomb's notebooks, under the heading 'One way to conceive of time.'*

*We are crawling along the ground into a vicious headwind. Or, better, because we do not control the pace at which we move, we are being dragged. Though whatever is doing the dragging does not obstruct the wind, which is vicious and biting, and so intense that, as we are dragged through it we are reshaped by it, slowly, as a glacier bears through rock. As we are dragged forward, the buffeting of the wind reshapes us, elongating us. From small worms we are drawn out, our legs stretched, our chests, our pricks pulled long, we are lengthened finally to man height, and as the battering continues our skin is shaken by the wind, pulled from us until it is no longer taut, until it hangs and sags. And finally we are dragged through the vicious wind until our skin is torn from our skeleton, as the dragging continues, and awareness ceases, even if the dragging does not.*

*We can cut the tether that pulls us forward, but we cannot turn off the wind. We can do nothing to escape the wind, but, in a limited way, we can free ourselves and explore ahead of the ever-forward dragging. We can send from our groove in the dirt emissaries of our selves: though the ability is limited, it exists. These emissaries*

*The memory faded.*

## LYDIA IN HER SADNESS, WAITING FOR A START

Lydia was smaller in her sadness, the way some animals lose size when they get wet. \_\_\_\_\_'s shower was broken and the apartment manager was still not around to fix it so I had come to use theirs. She didn't move from her bed or look at me while I asked my question, just lay shrunken into her sheets, fully clothed.

The shower water hitting my skin made me itch. Afterwards I went back upstairs and waited for \_\_\_\_\_ to return. I sat in the kitchen. He had to get back, we had to move. Just keeping still felt like a fight against gravity, or against drowning. It was driving me crazy. I got a feeling that I couldn't shake, as if instead of sitting in an empty room I was looking in at one from outside. I looked at my arms on the table. They were folded and I had my hat in my hands. I couldn't think of anything to do with my arms to make them look more lifelike so I pushed my chair back and looked down at my shoes. I moved them to show there were feet inside and that the feet were mine, but I still felt like so much furniture. I had to go, I was turning bugs. For what felt like skin-crawling days I waited for \_\_\_\_\_. Something was due, after all this waiting there had to be something coming, some beginning.

“Are you sober enough to see a client?”

Beneath the brim of his hat and the thousand pound rubble of his hangover, Mike Swagger managed a grin. “Too sober to want to,” he said. He scratched the stubble along the outline of his broad jaw and gave a yawn. “Bring me the bottle from the cabinet, close up shop and come work on it with me. We’ll be poor but we’ll be happy.”

At the connecting door, her hand on her hip, Marly eyed him indulgently. She’d been Swagger’s secretary since the day before he got his dick license. Sometimes he kidded her that the only reason he started the business was to impress her. It wouldn’t have been a bad reason. Every man who’d ever seen Marly Jenson smile or caught a glimpse of the way she’d straighten her skirt with a wriggle of her hips had thought about going clean, starting a business, working his way up in the world one way or another to impress her. That she had brains and a way with a .32: that was icing, Swagger thought.

Swagger ground the heels of his palms against his eyes, and dragged them down his face. He reached for a cigar and put his feet up on his desk. The previous night had been the official celebration for the retirement of Police Commissioner Peter Massey. The night before that Swagger had unofficially kicked off the celebrations with old Pete, who’d been his captain back when he’d been on the force. In those days Swagger’s way of attracting trouble had got them both into plenty of scrapes. [*Ed. note: see ‘The Hollowed Grave’ and ‘Murder at The Little Death’*] Now, after two days of drinking, with a headache that it didn’t seem would ever quit, Swagger felt like maybe Pete had finally got his own back. He lighted the cigar and grinned wolfishly at Marly, a smile that leaked smoke like a housefire.

Marly smiled back. She knew that Mike Swagger could be hungover, or falling-down drunk, or ill all the way to his final breath, and if pushed he'd still be more capable, quicker, more full of action and resolve than any two other men she'd ever met. She walked over to him and started repairing the shrunken, battered knot of his tie. He hung his arms around her waist while she worked. "I'd say you looked like death," she said, "but I'm pretty sure I just met him."

Swagger arched an eyebrow. "That so?" he said. "I'd have been grateful if he'd made it here a couple of hours ago, but now I'm inclined to try and beat the rap."

"It wouldn't be the first time," Marly said, smiling. Then her face was suddenly serious, almost afraid. She stepped away from him and for a second held his hands—large, strong and hard with calluses—in hers—soft, kind and cautious. "Mike, be careful with this one," she said. "I get a bad feeling from him. Whatever he wants just... Be careful." Then she withdrew from him and went back out into the anteroom. Swagger rubbed his jaw thoughtfully, then sat up in his chair and tried to exude the well-mannered confidence of the modern private eye.

As Marly reopened the door she announced, "Mr Cansel to see you, Mr Swagger."

"Please come in, Mr Cansel, take a seat," said Swagger. "Thank you Miss Jenson." Marly hadn't been mistaken. Swagger had been prepared for it, and liked to think he didn't surprise easy, but still he was taken aback by Cansel's appearance. "Can Miss Jenson get you anything, Mr Cansel?" he offered with a smile. "Coffee? Something stronger?" Cansel was hugely tall, wearing a vast black suit that dripped from him like darkness from a raincloud, heavy and ominous. His hands, in which he carried his hat, were

made of great, long bones and draped with thin skin. But it was the man's head...

"No, Mr Swagger, no coffee—and I do not drink," said Cansel, and his voice was hollow and deep, with an accent Swagger couldn't place. The tall man over-attended to some words, like he was trying to put the fear of God into them. "Parti-cu-alary at 9 o'clock on a Monday morning."

Swagger smiled. "Of course, Mr Cansel: a joke. I hardly touch the stuff myself." Swagger gestured for Marly to leave, and with just the slightest sigh of relief she closed the connecting door. Swagger knew that most secretaries, facing Cansel as their first customer of the day, would have been found a week later their hearts stopped, hair whitened, aged a hundred years in shock. He probably left a trail of them everywhere he went. No wonder Marly had got the idea he was bad news. Cansel's death head—his pitted eyes, the sharp bones of his cheeks—belonged in a Lon Chaney horror flick, not walking the streets.

"You ever been in pictures, Mr Cansel?" asked Swagger.

Cansel simply watched Swagger for a moment, as if deciding whether he was worth responding to, or whether to simply put an end to the séance. Maybe, thought Swagger, he'd flap his way out the window. "No, Mr Swagger, I have not," he said. Words fell from him with the finality of dirt onto a coffin. "I wonder, Mr Swagger, if we might discuss the business I came about so we do not have to detain each other any longer than is ne-ses-serry."

"Please go right ahead, Mr Cansel. Though perhaps you'd best start by telling me a bit about yourself," said Swagger. "I've always heard it's good business to know who it is you're in business with." He pulled his face into a look as open and trusting as he could make it.

“Certainly, Mr Swagger, though you should not need to know very much about me to assist in the task I would ask you to perform, so trivial and in-con-sequential it is. My name is Jenö Cansel, and I am recently arrived in your city in the hopes of finding a man by the name Jack Campbell, though I gather from the failures of my own efforts to locate young Mr Campbell that he may be opp-a-rating under a diff-a-rent name now.”

“Good friend of yours, this man whose name you’re not sure of?”

“I am quite aware, Mr Swagger,” replied Cansel, “that you are being flippant, but I hope you will not mind if I do not participate in your badinage.”

“That is entirely fine Mr Cansel. Badinage comes as part of the service, you won’t be billed any extra for it,” said Swagger, and breathed cigar smoke in the direction of the skull that sat opposite him intoning severely.

“No, Mr Campbell is not a good friend—in fact I have never met the young gentleman,” the skull continued. “I was, however, for several years a retainer for some portion of his family. Mr Campbell’s uncle employed me as such. The family’s wealth, unfortunately, dissipated and, although we might both have wished it was otherwise, it became ne-ses-serry for us to part ways. I recently learned, with some not insubstan-ti-al sadness, that he had passed away. As a final request on my services he asked that I find his nephew—Mr Jack Campbell—and inform him of his loss. There was, included in the communication I received, written by the senior Campbell but sent after his decease by his solicitor, a small sum of money, a part of it intended to remunerate me for the undertaking, a part to be given by me to Mr Jack Campbell.”

“Where exactly is it you’re from, Mr Cansel?” Swagger cut in. “I’m having trouble placing you. The accent,” he gestured with his cigar.

Cansel gave a smile that did not make him appear a hair’s breadth less ghastly or a shadow’s weight more amused. “I have travelled, Mr Swagger,” he said, simply. Then he returned to his subject: “It is from this small sum that it is my intention to pay you to assist me in locating Mr Campbell. There is not much finan-shi-al benefit to the young Mr Campbell in doing so, but it seems to me important, as it did to my old employer, that he should know of the sad conclusion of an outcrop of his family tree. As well as Mr Campbell’s name, I can provide you with this,” he handed across the desk a small photograph, “and tell you that he previously worked as a writer of stories for magazines. How long do you think it will take you to locate him, Mr Swagger?”

Swagger contemplated the photograph. It showed a man in his 20s or perhaps his early 30s: light-haired, well-groomed, with a boyish handsomeness and a look on his face that seemed to suggest that he liked the photographer but felt tortured by what they were doing to him. “He wrote for the sleeks?” Swagger asked.

“I believe,” replied Cansel, “that he wrote romantic stories and science fiction. A pulp writer.”

Swagger gave about as much attention to the end of his cigar as he’d been giving to the photograph. “If this agency were to agree to look for Mr Campbell, we work on a day rate. \$50 a day, plus expenses.”

“Here is \$200,” said Cansel, taking the money from a bill fold and laying it on the desk. “I trust that will enable you to begin looking. If more money becomes ne-ses-serry I can



provide it, within reason of course.”

Swagger frowned at the money on the table without reaching for it. Cansel waited patiently. “Where are you staying, Mr Cansel?” asked Swagger.

“You can reach me at the New Europe Hotel,” Cansel said. Swagger nodded thoughtfully, and lifted the \$200.

Before his new client left, Swagger had explained to him that his partner, Mr Childs, would begin the search that afternoon.

He was relating to Childs the tale Cansel had fed him and trying to give him some sense of the ghoul himself as Marly came and perched against his desk.

“I wish you’d been here to talk Mike out of taking his money, Childs,” she said. “He wasn’t like any client we’ve ever had. I haven’t stopped shivering since that man walked in the door.”

Childs was at his own desk, using his one arm to remove his artificial leg, as he had a preference for sitting without it. [*Ed. note: For the dramatic tales behind Childs’ injuries read ‘All Bloodied Up’ and ‘Back to the Wall’.*]

Swagger shrugged. “I inquired with the peeper at his hotel. He’s checked in, and under the same name he gave us. No sense sending \$200 walking because we didn’t care for how its companion looked.”

Childs nodded agreement.

“Find out where this Campbell is,” Swagger said to Childs, “and get a read on why someone might be looking for him. Then we decide whether to feed him to the ghoul.”

\* \* \*

The apartment building was at the far end of the tram line. Swagger recognised the big, eager face of the man standing in the door. Carey beamed as the gumshoe approached. "They got you working on this one, Mike?" he asked.

"I've been called in for questioning by the new boss," said Swagger. "They're going to give me the chair. How do things look inside?"

Detective Carey chuckled happily. "It depends how you feel about necks. If you've never cared for 'em then maybe there's something to enjoy. Otherwise I'd say not so good."

"They got you out here keeping an eye on those slugs?" asked Swagger and gestured at the door frame, where two bullets, .45s, Swagger thought by the look of them, were stuck.

Carey just about knocked his own hat off in surprise. "Now look at that!" He laughed again. "Look at that, will you just look at that! Mike, you're the first soul to lay eyes on those. We've all been walking past them with our brains in our boots—" The freckles on Carey's face skipped with laughter. "There were gunshots heard and they couldn't figure 'em out, and—" he pointed and his laughter spread, creasing him at the waist.

Swagger lit a cigar—eventually the laughter ran its course. Detective Carey wiped at his eyes. "Say, Mike," he said. "Tell 'em I found those, will ya? It'll look good for me."

"Sure I will, Carey", Swagger told him, then he clapped him on the shoulder and went to inspect the late Jack Campbell.

It was the bullet in the chin that had finally done for the

## THE SCENE AT HOLCOMB'S

We'd never walked to Jarecki's faster, and \_\_\_\_\_ had barely gone in to speak to Fylan before we were on a streetcar on our way across town. It was more debt collection.

This time the debt belonged to Holcomb, the writer. Unless he'd just inherited a movie studio or an oil well it didn't seem likely he'd be able to pay. It would have taken him a lifetime to lose the same amount on the friendly games across \_\_\_\_\_'s kitchen table, and he'd been trying.

Holcomb's was at the dead end of the line going south. By the time we crept up to it, it was dark. The lights of a phone booth and the streetlights above appeared out of the rain, like a boxy moon and past-ripe stars.

The rain was keeping the street clear of people, although we had to walk around two kids who were holding down a third, silent and unmoving, and slapping him across the face and the belly while their short-sleeved shirts soaked through. Playing at cops, maybe. A large man on the other side of the street lowered his hat against the weather as he passed us, then was gone around a corner.

We made our way to the second floor but didn't know which of those apartments was Holcomb's. \_\_\_\_\_ was about to start kicking at doors and threatening households in neat order, but when I knocked at the first of them, it swung open without complaint. There was no answer as \_\_\_\_\_ announced us.

The place was an upended library. Piles of books lay across the floor, or stood without resolve in stacks. None of the gold names up the spines belonged to Holcomb. There were no aliens or time travellers. It was the kind of stuff they tell you is good, that tires your eyes and broadens your vocabulary. From beneath the desk sloped, shameful, a pile of magazines. \_\_\_\_\_ threw one to me. It was a love pulp. Sure enough, Holcomb's name was inside, though it came cross-dressed, with a new feminine forename. I pushed at the rest of the pile with the toe of my shoe then dropped the magazine back in place.

As I did, I heard \_\_\_\_\_ give a long, low whistle of appreciation. He had opened the door through to the bedroom and stood looking in. I walked over.

The house edge had got to Holcomb.

He lay on his front on the bed, his head tilted up, his chin propped on the mattress so that he looked directly at us. He looked like he had taken a beating, and that it wasn't the only bad thing to happen to him recently. \_\_\_\_\_ lighted a cigarette and we went into the room. One of Holcomb's eyes was swollen and purple. It bulged out from his face like a piece of fruit ready to drop off a bush. There was a dark patch in his light hair.

When we turned him over we found a neck you could have ridden a streetcar over for all the difference it would make, a neck spun into a rat tail. In his mouth he still had a few teeth. And in the middle of his chin he had the small round hole of a .32—a little mouth, caught in a perfect little surprised "o".

\_\_\_\_\_ ran his little finger around the rim of the hole. He said, "Where do you suppose he keeps his money?"

We looked. We checked under pillows, in pockets, behind drawers, under loose floorboards and in any likely looking books. I patted Holcomb down and pulled off his shoes. We didn't find anything. We didn't know if there was anything to find.

Outside the street was deserted. Maybe the city's always so still and empty just before any shots are fired. Certainly this is a place where no one's ever known to see anything they didn't want to see.

Rain was streaking past the only lights—the streetlights and some expressionless windows—and noisily hitting the street. A mass of something lay on the ground by the dark phone booth.

I bent down and picked up a heavy rock the size of a deck of playing cards that lay beside the door where it could be used as a prop. \_\_\_\_\_ started to snarl at me for blocking his way and I turned around. His feet were in front of a small step, and as I knocked him in the shoulder, he tumbled over the threshold back into the building. Then I turned and heaved the rock toward the mass and kept turning, throwing my own weight through the street door. Before I hit the ground there was the sound of lead knocking into the doorframe and the glass of the phone booth shattering.

As he got his legs out from under me, \_\_\_\_\_ kicked me irritably in the jaw. On the street there was nothing left to see. The mass on the ground was gone. The door on the phone booth swung jerkily shut and, as it closed, the light inside flickered on.

## *Muscle*

Apart from some broken glass and two bullets in a doorframe instead of in some dumb muscle, all was as it was meant to be. The rain kept falling.

## GOING TO THE LOVE INTEREST'S WORK, AN INTRODUCTION

After you die all the people you know would sooner put a match to all the things that matter to you than have to sign a receipt. Lawyers and landlords won't search hard for a home for your fondest memories. The one thing that always gets inherited is debt. When your life hits that dead end, know that your debt keeps moving.

Bernard was sympathetic. About the trouble we'd had, about the writer's corpse lying in the bed and ours meant for the gutter. He commiserated with me, but explained that on the other side of the office door, Fylan wasn't going to be impressed with any explanations that \_\_\_\_\_ might be giving. "You should have brought back his fillings—something," he said. I nodded, though if the writer had any fillings they'd already gone out the door or down the back of his throat.

That night \_\_\_\_\_ was sore from being shouted at and sore from being shot at.

Jarecki bestowed Holcomb's debt on Holcomb's girl. We'd never known anything about a girl when he was alive, and the apartment where he'd stopped bleeding for the last time hadn't hinted at her presence. Maybe she had as little interest as Holcomb in anything that wasn't books.

But whether it was the information that was faulty or we were underestimating the allure of a writer of cheap love pulp, it didn't matter. The debt was hers now. Just like the shoes on my feet were mine and the city's streets belonged to whoever rode along them most expensively.

We had two addresses for her: her apartment and the dentist where she worked as an assistant. It's easier to embarrass people at their work and smarter to hurt them at their home. Our first call was to the dentist.

The dentist was called Boken. His business was pristine. The anteroom shone, from the clean floors to the clean receptionist, while around it the building fell apart and the neighbourhood rotted. It was a birdhouse painted baby blue and set in a dead tree.

An old man perched on the edge of a chair, bent forward with a curved back, and

a young woman clutched a bag to her lap, and pressed her knees tightly together. The receptionist in clean medical whites eyed us cautiously from behind a counter and the inch-thick glass of her spectacles. She sat in a booth of diagrams of bisected molars and slogans about flossing, and twice-life-sized replicas of beautiful teeth. There was a price list above her shoulder and she was tapping a pen against a list of appointments open in front of her.

\_\_\_\_\_ lighted a cigarette and approached. He asked her civilly whether she was Evelyn Heydt. She told him no and asked if he'd take a seat. He told her no and smiled at her. She looked unnerved. Her eyes moved to his teeth. Professional interest maybe. She backed from her booth, slipping through a door in the rear. "Keep the sun in your smile!" said one of the posters.

If they were going to do much of anything for the old man they were going to have to find his teeth first. \_\_\_\_\_ knew the girl. She worked for the madam that considered \_\_\_\_\_ a guardian of young love. He sat next to her and started a conversation.

The old man in the chair pushed himself up on an old wooden stick the colour of tar and started shouting he wasn't going to be kept waiting while one more someone else without an appointment went to see the dentist before him. He asked us if we knew what piles were, and said that he would tell us exactly what they were. "Little balloons of blood, right across the verge of your asshole—imagine that, you rotten damn pair," he said. He asked us what we thought sitting on a waiting room chair with piles felt like, and then promised to tell us exactly what it felt like.

\_\_\_\_\_ frowned, maybe thinking about piles, maybe not. The sadness in the girl's face would have been more moving if she was beautiful. The pile sufferer suffered.

When the receptionist returned she moved her appointment book to the side and lifted up a hinged section of the counter, then she asked if the two gentlemen would come through, which we took to be us. As we passed her she pressed herself into the wall like she was pushing herself through a grill. No one listened to the complaints of the old man sitting on his piles.

A man in a white smock opened the door at the end of the short hall as we reached it. He looked at us, then told us we weren't police in a way that suggested the waiter had brought the wrong kind of soup at an inappropriate temperature. I walked him

backwards into the room.

It was cramped and immaculate. No child ever had a better-dusted dollhouse. The underside of a bed made up part of a wall, but to fold it down, you'd have had to move the white chair with boughs of lights and mirrors and lenses that filled the middle of the room. And to move the chair you'd have to move the grinning man with the weightlifter's build who was sitting in it. His grin was the grin of a sportsman the official hasn't spotted standing on someone's neck. In the corner of the room, filed away like an instrument on a tray, stood a smaller man with only one arm and one leg. The empty sleeve of his left arm was pinned up just beneath the shoulder. His right trouser ended in a curve beneath the knee and continued as an aluminum pole with a rubber hoof.

"No, they're not police, are you boys?" the man on the chair said. As he spoke he crossed his raised legs, placed his hat on his chest and folded his arms behind his head. His jacket fell open and there was a gun in a holster tucked beneath his armpit.



reason. "Plenty times crooks have used honest agencies to do their dirty work."

"Cansel better be worrrying," said Swagger, angrily. "If he did this then we're going to find him. I don't care if he's blown town or he's on his way past the moon. I don't care if this kid never had a friend in his life and his mother couldn't find a nice word to say about him." His voice was raising to a preacher's roar—every flatfoot in the apartment had turned to watch. "Cansel and everyone who worked with him, they're all going to pay for it. They don't get to decide that this kid deserved to die. They might have used me to do it—well, so I'm going to make damn sure they don't get away with it. I'm going to get justice for him. They're going to be sorry for the day they turned Mike Swagger into a weapon, because it's not going to be cop justice they're going to get, it's not going to come to them through a jury, it's going to come from the barrel of a gun. And I'm going to make sure it isn't quick, they're going to feel it, and they're going to pray for it to be over."

Cromarty and Massey exchanged looks. Cromarty was working hard to keep the smile from his face. "You know I'm going to have to try and get there before you, Mike," he said.

"Yeah," said Swagger, "and if you do you'll give them a lawyer and a fair shake, and every right they didn't give to Campbell as they were playing their sick game, enjoying his suffering. They better hope you reach them first, but I wouldn't put any bets on it, because I've got a couple of breaks going my way. The first is I don't have a rulebook weighing me to a desk or any red tape tying me to a chair. And the second is I already know more about what happened here tonight than you do."

Cromarty smacked his hand against the wall. "The hell you do," he snarled.

"Carey found something downstairs."

"Carey couldn't find water if he was floating in it," said Cromarty.

"There's two fresh slugs lodged in the doorframe," said Swagger. "I'd bet they were put there by someone waiting in the phone booth for the killer to come out. The booth with the broken glass that I bet you also don't have anywhere in your notebook. Someone waited in there, sheltering in the rain and out of sight. Ever notice the way the light goes off in a phone booth as long as the door's open? They waited in it with the door open so they'd be hidden and out of the rain. When the killer came out they got off a couple of shots. Maybe the killer fired back a shot of his own, though I couldn't find the bullet if he did. Maybe he just threw something, enough to spook whoever was waiting for him. Either way, it looks like there's more to this than just one deadbeat who pushed his line of credit too far. Maybe that means that Cansel, or whoever did this, is still in town, still tying up loose ends. Either way I'm going to find them, and when I do they're going to see what real justice is."

"You don't hold back anything from us, Swagger," ordered Cromarty sternly. "Anything you find out that would assist us, I want to hear about it. And anytime I need to ask you or Childs any questions, I expect you to be available to answer them."

Swagger pulled on his hat. "I'm going to find this killer for you," he said, "and when I do, don't worry—I'll tell you where to send the meat wagon."

The night seemed lit by Swagger's anger. He went to the

## HIS NAME WAS MIKE SWAGGER

His name was Mike Swagger. He stood up and gave it to us merrily and then flashed a Photostat license. He was shamus, not cop. Standing he was almost as tall as me, and his jacket, when it fell shut, didn't leave any hint of the big revolver in the shoulder rig—it was a nicely made suit.

The man in the corner stepped forward and gestured for us to lift our arms so he could fan us. \_\_\_\_\_ bristled, but before anything could happen Swagger cut in. "Leave that out, Childs," he said. "We're not here knocking heads or for some Sullivan charge. In fact, I'd bet we're here for exactly the same reason as these boys are." He made his big face into a question mark a mile high and directed it at \_\_\_\_\_.

\_\_\_\_\_ didn't respond. Swagger might as well have been a car he'd been waiting on so he could get by. He waited and then he told the room that we hadn't come to have our teeth picked but to find out where Evelyn Heydt was, and that a dick licence and a cripple weren't enough to keep us from asking what we'd come to ask. I was watching the man in the dentist's chair. I saw his smile disappear before he had time to fix it back on. And when I looked at Childs I saw a new streak of metal had appeared across the knuckles of his only hand.

But then Swagger clapped his big hands together like cymbals. "I knew it!" he said. "We've just been asking the same thing. Our friend Mr Boken here doesn't have too strong a fix on that." He looked at Boken to elaborate. Boken said that she should have been in for work two hours ago but hadn't arrived. "Mr Boken," Swagger said, "says it's not like her not to come in—in fact it's never happened before. Isn't that right, Mr Boken?" Boken nodded.

\_\_\_\_\_ looked at Swagger, then at the dentist, then he turned on his heel and we started to walk out the room.

"Let me buy you boys a drink," the big shamus said behind us. We kept walking.

Even as we walked out of the reception he was behind us. "Let me buy you boys a drink," he said. "Don't you want a chance to talk?"

We'd nearly reached the love interest's address when \_\_\_\_\_ put his hand across my chest and stopped me. I followed his gaze up to a window of the building. There was a girl framed there, backlit and beautiful, brushing her hair. A dagger thin split between her blood-red lips, her hair following in brown folds down onto her shoulders and slipping like fingers onto the straps of her dress.

We'd hustled to get there like we were being tugged along on a string, but now we stopped and watched while Evelyn Heydt—because who else could it be?—finished brushing every lock of her hair, and who knows how long it took. Finally she laid down her brush, walked to the window like a movie star accepting an award and lowered the curtain on the whole scene, and right then, dead on cue, out from the wings comes the delivery boy: a kid escorting a stack of groceries almost his size. We intercepted him at the door, \_\_\_\_\_ reassured the kid that Miss Heydt would get her groceries—of course they were hers—and then when the kid paused after I'd unburdened him, \_\_\_\_\_ let him know that he'd have other things to worry about if he didn't beat it. I felt bad about it, if only because you could tell from the kid's face that delivering groceries to Evelyn Heydt was the best thing his week ever had to offer.

I carried the groceries, and \_\_\_\_\_ knocked sharp on her door and covered the peephole with his palm. A voice, unclouded and bright as a summer day in better places, came through the door. "Who is it?" she said. \_\_\_\_\_ said it was her groceries and she opened up. Through it came this instant flood of desire, this charged moment of seeing the beautiful face from the window again but now also the dress, and the hidden, quieted, deafening body beneath it. But something else must have pushed back in the other direction from us. She stepped back like she was driven and we had to move after her, we were after it now, if what she wanted was chased, then she'd get it.

the murder, he might have called himself Cansel, but if you'd seen him you—"

"Mr Swagger," she interrupted, "I heard about your ghoul." She sounded abrupt, hurt. "I had every question you've just asked me from the police, I told them I knew nothing about that part of Jack's life, because I chose to know nothing about it. I'm sorry, but I can't help you and I'd like you to leave."

Swagger nodded, thoughtful. He stood. "I'm sorry to have bothered you, Miss Heydt," he said. "I'll leave my card." She didn't respond, she didn't stand to show him out. He felt evicted from a place of warmth into the cold city. He walked to a drugstore and made a call to the office to see if Childs had left any messages. He smoked a cigar until he noticed he was chewing the end almost off: there was something he had missed, something he hadn't asked, or didn't want to. He walked back to Evelyn Heydt's apartment.

He found the vestibule door open, and when he went up the stairs he saw Evelyn's apartment door slipping closed. He pressed a hand to it, silently keeping it ajar. With his other hand he took his Colt .45 from its holster. On the far side of the door he could hear Evelyn Heydt and she sounded panicked. "Who are you?" she said. "What do you want?"

Swagger moved to put his eye to the gap. He saw the backs of two men. He could see that the smaller one had a knife. They were moving toward Evelyn, who was backing away from them, her arms raised in front of her chest. Swagger could imagine the smirks on their faces. Anger flooded his thoughts again. He knew men like this. He'd seen what they'd do to women—thinking they were tough because they could throw a scare into a frail, because they could

make her beg, or cry. There were the women who'd been cut up, and worse, because some dirty crook was enjoying his own power too much to know when to quit—women who'd been killed. He gripped his Colt like he already had one of them in his grip, then he eased his way into the room as silently as he could.

The smaller one was speaking, his voice raspy and vicious. "Box, why don't you tell her what we came for?" He wiped the small blade of his knife on his trousers. The other man, who he called Box, began to speak. Swagger swung the door shut. The noise made them turn to the barrel of the Colt. To make sure they noticed it, he cocked the hammer.

"Why don't you tell me what you came here for, while the lady gets busy calling the police," he said.

"Oh Mike!" Evelyn cried. She ran to him, keeping as much furniture between herself and the two intruders as she could, and buried herself in his side. "Thank God Mike! You made it here just in time."

"Always, sweetheart," he said. "Go and raise a couple of buzzers would you, while I ask these two who sent them crawling out their holes."

Before she left, he could feel her squeeze his body. It was a small gesture but full of gratitude and relief, and of promise.

When she was out of the apartment he used the long barrel of the Colt to invite the two men to sit. The one with the knife sneered at him. "You can stand or you can sit," said Swagger. "However you like it. But I mean to get some answers out of you. We don't have a lot of time before the cops get here so I might not be able to ask nice. You two don't look like you've got a lot of smart ideas sparking in your heads, so I'm going to assume someone told you to come here. Who was that?"

The one with the knife spat onto the ground in front of Swagger's feet, then swung his arm up, the knife disappearing into itself before he dropped it into his pocket.

Swagger almost pulled the trigger then. "You're quite the tough \_\_\_\_\_ aren't you," he said. He wanted to put a hole in this little loogan's side. Even Cromarty wouldn't give him a hard time about it, some vicious little torpedo who'd broken in to rasp threats, a scar across the side of his chin, no one would mind if they had to patch up a bullet hole before they put the cuffs on him. He didn't shoot, though. It wouldn't achieve anything, wouldn't get him any closer to the information he needed. But it wasn't that which stopped him. "The only reason," Swagger said, "I haven't dropped you with a bullet, is because she seems like a nice girl, and I don't want her to have to clear your blood off her carpet."

The big torpedo, Box, took half a step toward Swagger with his hands raised, palms flat, Swagger swung the gun onto him and started telling him to stay put. Then, he heard the door, and Evelyn Heydt's voice, timid and fragile, say, "Mike."

He stepped back as he turned so that he could see the door and keep the gun pointed where it was. In the doorway, a snub-nosed automatic pointing at her head, stood Evelyn.

"I trust it won't be nes-sess-ary to shoot Ms Heydt," said Cansel from behind the doorjamb.

"You killed Holcomb," said Swagger, "and you're going to die for it."

"I am not a murderer, Mr Swagger, and I hope you do not mean to turn me into one," said Cansel, pressing the barrel of his gun against Evelyn's temple as he spoke. She winced,

## AT THE LOVE INTEREST'S

\_\_\_\_\_ laid the delivery crate down on a chair and took a quart of gin from it and cracked that open. The apartment smelled like Evelyn Heydt, the place was suffused with her deep driven scent, she stood scared in this rich beautiful space that was completely hers, standing as straight and unnatural as a nail that had just been pounded into it. Her eyes big as spotlights, her lips fell redly apart. "Who are you?" she said. "What do you want?"

\_\_\_\_\_ finished drinking from the gin and laid it down, and he took his little butterfly knife from his pocket and slowly unfolded it. As Evelyn Heydt was retreating into herself, withdrawing out of the room into a scared and solitary part of it, we were expanding, growing out, it was our stage now and it was beginning to feel good to stand on it, and have her eyes on us, fearful, quivering. \_\_\_\_\_ took his knife and I thought about taking some rope, or a sheet. We could blindfold her and carry her out, bundle her into the boot of a car, or we could keep her here until she understood exactly what was required of her. But first we stalked her across the room, and she asked us what we wanted. Every angle and curve from the nape of her neck to her calves and her ankles formed like a letter in a perfect sentence on the surface of my tongue, my mouth deliciously filling with words. \_\_\_\_\_ swung his knife lazily across before himself, and said, "Box, why don't you tell her what we came for."

She was backed into the window, her legs bending as her hips pressed back onto the sill, her back pressing against the glass. My mouth turned over the new sibilant curves in the new folds of her dress, the coiled vowels of distress behind her mouth. *Now*, it was *now*: I opened my mouth. "Holcomb's dead," I told her, "and you're"

and then \_\_\_\_\_ was struck and \_\_\_\_\_ struck the ground and I started to turn but a knock to the back of my neck and another to my legs, and I was on one knee, and there was a small metallic snicker. Trying to move forward tipped me painfully sideways. My left wrist was handcuffed to my right ankle.

With my cheek against the carpet I saw Mike Swagger, private detective, stagily kick \_\_\_\_\_'s knife away across the room, and his feet sidle around us. The love interest



flung her arms around him, "Oh thank God, Mike, thank God you made it here just in time!"

It was a tough scene to watch.

"Don't worry kid, but let's get out of here," said the shamus. "You two so much as wag your tails too hard and there's lead coming back through this door for you to fetch." And then with the love interest pressed protectively behind him, he circled round us, his gun bravely fixed on the unconscious \_\_\_\_\_ and the immobile me, and they made their exit.

I tried to move and the same pain from the first lunge that caught me short dug into me, so I stopped trying. I didn't want to wait too long for \_\_\_\_\_ to come round so I used my free hand to slap and shake his face. Eventually his eyes opened and simultaneously he spat at me, a thin rope of spit that slicked across my eye and cheek. Once he was awake, he went to the dressing table and recovered his little knife from beneath it.

He took a couple of hairpins from a drawer, and used them to relieve me of my cuffs. It didn't bear to stick around, not when the cops seemed bound to be on their way, expecting to find us trussed and waiting, so we blew.

But outside, standing beneath a tree on his rubber hoof, taking the air, was Childs, Swagger's gunsel. The smart play would have been to spin on our heels and head off in the other direction, until we'd put enough distance between ourselves and the place of certain recent threatening behavior for everything to start looking a bit hazier and more subjective. This the sound legal counsel. But we were bruised and sore and it seemed like a pleasure to give Swagger the straight goods on whether a cripple was enough to hold us tight, so we headed straight for Childs.

\_\_\_\_\_ snarled at him a little and pulled out the butterfly knife again. He said, "Tell your elbow that the next time I'll see him coming, and when I do I'm going to knock his beak through the roof of his hat."

Childs didn't step back from the knife, or pull out his knuckles, but he looked over his shoulder, with its empty flap of sleeve, and there was Swagger, walking toward us, closer than hell, close as sweat to skin, and \_\_\_\_\_ reared like a startled horse but then widened his shoulders and seemed ready to jump on the detective, to clamber

up him, like a man swinging his way up the side of a building to punch through the windows.

Swagger held up his big peaceful paws. "Look, that scene up there was no damn good," he said, "and I hope you boys know I realize that. But we're none of us green, we all know how the game is played. And I tried to make the set-up clear, to sit down and talk you into this situation properly before you marched over here, but you wouldn't hear it then."

The big detective paused. \_\_\_\_\_ still bristled but Swagger was at his ease, there was nothing defensive in the way he held up one hand as he spoke, there was no sign that he was expecting a lunge from \_\_\_\_\_ which was something you wanted to be ready for if it was coming.

"But I still want things to be jake between us," Swagger said. "I can appreciate good workmanship wherever I see it, and the way you were putting the fright into that frail up there, that was something special. You do good work, I knew that the moment I saw you, and I'm not going to make it *my* business to hurt *your* business."

By this point \_\_\_\_\_ was looking at the gumshoe with more curiosity than spite. The butterfly knife hung in his hand like a forgotten spoon in the hand of a kid who's finished a sundae.

"Listen, the last thing I want to do is get in a position where I have to go toe-to-toe with a couple of tough loogans such as yourselves again. I got through it once, by the skin of my teeth's skin, but I wouldn't like to go up against you again. So how about we go and I buy us all a drink and we can have a talk and I can set things jake between us?"

Once, back when he had a working neck, a lot more teeth and one less hole in his head, I'd watched Holcomb on a bad streak at a poker game, losing money at each hand and just tilting harder after it on the next. When he'd lost all he had to lose and as much as the rest of the table was willing to take from him in promises, he'd sat back in his chair with a smile on his face that said that if nothing else he was at least drunk. Then he started talking about "people", which was how he often talked about himself, and about how they'd sometimes get the feeling that they didn't know why they made the decisions they made or acted the way they acted: like the real business of everything that was just being felt by them was actually being conducted somewhere far away.

I thought that made some sense, that it was a notion people probably got a lot

more than they admitted.

At any rate, we agreed to the drink.

frozen in place, shivering with fear. Instinctively he reached through the struts of the banister and squeezed her delicate ankle to comfort her. He only realized his mistake when she jumped almost through the ceiling with a shriek she must have been working up to since the first moment her apartment door opened and trouble walked in, or since the moment she was born maybe.

“Easy!” said Swagger. “They’ve gone.”

“O Mike!” she cried and ran to meet him at the top of the staircase. “Thank God, it’s you. I thought I was shot.”

Swagger kept himself from laughing and pulled her to his chest. She wrapped her arms around him gratefully. “You get to raise the alarm before that ghoul got his hands on you?” he asked.

“No,” she said, but pulled at his waist to stop him going to phone for the police. “Don’t go yet,” she said. He could feel through his chest that she was still shivering with fear. He stood and held her until she stopped, and then went with her back into her apartment.

\* \* \*

“She’s pretty,” said Marly. “Surprised you didn’t take her in yourself.”

Swagger had told Evelyn she’d be safer not to stay at her own place, at least for a short while, and had brought her to the office so she could move into Marly’s. Marly had just got back from walking her there.

Swagger pushed Marly’s hair back behind her ear. “She’s a scared, sweet kid. Cut her a break.”

Marly blushed at her own unkindness, and nodded. “What did they go after her for, anyway?” she asked.

Swagger sat behind his desk and put his big legs across it. "Same reason I was there—to find out what she knew about Holcomb."

"And what does she know?"

"As little as anyone, it seems like," said Swagger. "But it tells us Cansel still has some reason for being interested in Holcomb even now that he's filed away in the police morgue. Whatever he wanted from Holcomb, either Holcomb didn't give it up, or else another party got to it first and Cansel's running ragged trying to get a line on it, just like we are."

"So Cansel will stick around?" she asked. "He can't know how mad he's got you."

"Maybe he'll blow now. He probably thought we'd drop it as soon as Holcomb showed up dead—that's why he paid us the 200 in advance, so we'd have no reason to help track him down. He thought we wouldn't mind giving a kid a shove into his setup so long as he wasn't in arrears. Well he'll have tumbled to it now because I told him: if he killed the kid he's going to die for it. Maybe he'll have got wise and quit town. But somehow I don't think so. I think Cansel's too keen on whatever's got him fixed here, so it's something more than a gambling debt."

Childs returned. He'd been asking around on Clarence Lowden. He'd gone to the station and found out plenty, and nothing to tie him to Holcomb, or to Cansel, or to any grifter, yegg, pigeon, pool hall bum, con or vagrant who ever discredited themselves anywhere within 100 miles of the city. He'd never spent a minute in bracelets or a single night in the cells. They'd heard of him, but only because he gave generously twice a year to the Daughters of Policemen fund. Clarence Edward Lowden III was society. Heir to the

Lowden Cosmetics fortune.

Swagger gave a long whistle. "No kidding." He chewed on his cigar, his brow furrowed. "And he's still in well with the family?" Childs nodded. "So he's not low on scratch."

"He's also 250lb and five five," said Childs. "Hard to imagine him sneaking around and squeezing necks."

"He's never graced a police jotter, it's a cinch he didn't kill Holcomb, and he's got no need of the money. Cansel's just giving us a bum steer, set us chasing katydids and keep us out of his way." Swagger took his feet from his desk, and clapped a hand against one of his thighs. "So we're off Lowden. He's a dead end."

Childs nodded. "That's what I thought, but I went past Mannette," said Childs.

Mannette was another private dick, who worked for a large agency that kept their own files on persons of note. Childs said he found out they had some information on Lowden that had never reached the police. The agency had done some work for him when he'd got caught in a badger game. Lowden fell to talking to a girl in bobby socks with a cuter than pie drawl and ended up back at what he took to be her apartment. The girl turned out to be 14 and the apartment to belong to her father. The father had taken photographs that Lowden was extremely keen shouldn't come into the possession of his own family, or the press, or the police. He was perfectly happy to buy the photographs out of existence, but when the father realized who he had on the line, the price kept going up and up, and Lowden contacted Mannette's agency. They retrieved them.

After that, said Childs, any woman who could walk without need of a cane scared Lowden out of his suit. He hardly left his house anymore for fear of succumbing to im-

propriety, or at any rate of being caught in it. He had taken up hobbies more godly and venerable: philately and antique curios. How from his big house out in the hills he could have got himself mixed up in trouble, that was a question, but he had at least got mixed up in it once before.

“What was Mannette’s take on it?” Swagger asked.

Childs scratched at the stump of his shoulder. “He said he hadn’t worked on the Lowden case, but he’d met him once and he gave him the chills.”

\* \* \*

Lowden had been in a very good mood when he first opened his door. He was small, extremely fat and looked like a piece of exploded popcorn, dripping butter in the heat. “But of course!” he piped, bouncing on his heels, when Swagger asked him if he was Clarence Lowden.

His mood changed the second Swagger showed him his license. “A lousy dick,” he muttered. He pulled a handkerchief the size of a parachute from his pocket and mopped his brow.

It was an unhappy, ungracious Lowden that sat in his drawing room. The room was busy with creatures. Beside Lowden there was a bright red monkey, its eyes lifted blissfully to heaven, the top of its skull removed so its hollow ceramic body could be filled through its head. There were jars with curved arms handled to hips, paint across eyes and round flesh decorated in angled patterns, a rodent resting on long forearms, a plate decorated in thick red and black lines with a crocodile’s body carrying a squared human face. Lowden took ice from the lidded back of an ocelot, its body bloated, eyes

## SWAGGER BUYS DRINKS

“Most people,” said Swagger, “couldn’t ask for a glass of water in this place and walk out intact.” He laughed and clapped me hard across the shoulders. We made for a table. I recognized the man sitting at it: he had memorable ears, ears like a mudslide: I’d seen him box. When he saw the big shamus carrying a mess of drinks toward him he cleared out, wiping his seat down with his cap before he left. He had somewhere else to be. We took our seats and Swagger pushed a whisky into \_\_\_\_\_’s hand, and raised his own in a toast. “To bygones!” he said and knocked it back. \_\_\_\_\_ sipped sullenly, while the cripple and I watched.

“I meant every word I said back there, boys, I hope you know that. Damn fine work. And I don’t begrudge you putting the scare on Evelyn Heydt, and I hope you don’t begrudge me having to do my job either.” He took a gulp of beer and wiped the foam from his lip with the cuff of his shirt. I drank some of my water. Without taking his wary eyes off Swagger, \_\_\_\_\_ had finished his whisky and started on a beer.

By the time he was four drinks in Swagger had moved from telling us how much he hoped we understood to talking about the war. He’d seen things in the war.

“I once saw a man dying on the ground, his wife—his goddamned beautiful young wife—and his three young kids gathered round him weeping, the ground muddy and red from his blood and their tears. It was goddamned tragic,” he said. “Enough to make a weak man cry. I’d shot him. You got to do things like that in the war, and no one asking to see a license or taking statements about whether their back was turned or if they were armed. Tragic, of course, but necessary. I blew a hole in his chest the kids could have crawled up in. Childs was there,” he gestured to the cripple who was turning his finger round the rim of his glass of beer and watching Swagger talk. We were all watching him talk, but not, you got the idea, the same way as Childs was. “He took a bullet for me that day. Caught it beneath the shoulder. It cost him that arm. The only friend I’ve ever had worth a damn, and the only man I’d trust when my back’s to the wall and the lead’s set to fly. He saved my life when he caught that bullet. I got my revenge though. Burnt that whole damn village to the ground. I must have killed thirty of the



bastards that day. I probably got the one that did that to him, we guess." Swagger finished his beer and broke the back of another one. Then he raised it to the cripple, who looked on like a taxidermied hound, its head admiringly raised. "The best man I know," he said, "and they took his arm, the sons of bitches!" And he flung the glass of beer into the wall. \_\_\_\_\_ had been keeping pace, had been loosened by his whiskies and beers, so now he grabbed my glass of water from the table and flung it after Swagger's beer. "SONS OF BITCHES," he screamed, and went back to his own drink.

"You boys haven't heard of a writer called Holcomb, have you?" Swagger asked.

"Sounds like a good war," said \_\_\_\_\_.

"It was a hell of a war," said Swagger wistfully. "Evelyn Heydt, she owes money?"

\_\_\_\_\_ didn't say anything.

"Well let's say she does, just for talking. That's not a thing that concerns us. Let's say she caught it off a writer called Holcomb. I know women who've caught worse things off me in the past." He grinned at Childs and got a dutiful smirk back. "And let's further say that Holcomb isn't in much of a condition to be earning a wage as anything but paste right now. That also doesn't concern us. Hell, could be he deserved it—I know plenty that do. There's not enough rods in this city for all the shooting it would take to clean it up. Heydt, Holcomb. None of that matters to us. I'm just interested in you boys. You boys do damn fine work." His drink tipped back. "Hell, I'm getting us another," he said. \_\_\_\_\_ went with him. I was left with the cripple staring at me like I was something unpleasant but uninteresting on the rim of his glass. I still hadn't heard him say a word.

I was about to ask if he was dumb as well as a cripple when he leaned across at me, pushing the stump of his shoulder into me, his breath itching my face. He said, "You a mute?" I shook my head no. He kept his voice low and his eyes on me. "I love him," he said. "I love Mike Swagger." He looked at me, but not like he was expecting anything, and I found I didn't have much to say. I thought how the way his stump was, to someone else in the bar we'd look like a magic trick, like he'd pushed an arm clean through me. Then Swagger and \_\_\_\_\_ came back carrying drinks, and Childs sat back in his chair. They hadn't brought me another water.

A few drinks later, Swagger was telling another war story. About a time Childs had dived

on top of a grenade. “He saved my goddamn life. That grenade blew both of his kidneys clean out of him,” he was saying. “He still doesn’t piss right. The best friend I have in the world. In the world. You boys are freelance, right? I mean I know you do most of your work for... Danskin? Or...?” He looked at \_\_\_\_\_ inquisitively, but he might as well have asked the faces in his billfold. “The point is you do good work,” Swagger said, “and maybe you’re interested in being hired to do some more. Take this.” He pulled out a business card and slid it face down across the table to \_\_\_\_\_. “That’s my address. If you’re interested stop by some time tomorrow. Call before you do. Marly, a real doll—she’ll take a message if I’m out. We’re engaged in a project at the moment and we could stand a little help, and I know you’re up to it. Might even be more interesting than breaking hands and fanning dead writers,” he said cheerfully and slapped \_\_\_\_\_ on the shoulder.

\_\_\_\_\_ had picked up the card and looked it over, and he tucked it into his pocket with a nod.

They drank until they could barely stand and Swagger’s stories got caught in time, looping round and round, until \_\_\_\_\_ was howling and roaring more and more while they looped like it was a ride at the fairground, and Childs eyed me and nursed his beer, and I drank my water and wondered what it was all about.

### THREE VISITORS

*Why have they even come to visit him? He sits like death, he could be asleep, he is a lump, a tedious lump. They hear that he is here and they can't wait—they come immediately. They came because a name they recognized in this peculiar place, of course they came! They came as a joke, for a distraction, and their distraction is more boring than their boredom ever was. He's an elephant graveyard, he's a big stone pharaoh sunk in sand, he's boring, boring, boring.*

*They come in and, sure, they get to laugh a little, though they pass it off as coughing, they cough into their hands, they cough into one another's shoulders, but they are laughing. Laughing at the thing on his head, the ridiculous thing. They think it looks like someone built a treehouse on him. They squeeze each other on the hips with something like glee. And this feeling like glee, this swell giddiness swells as he turns, his head turns, only his head, like a tank on manoeuvres. They tremble with excitement, they clutch at each other, the three of them pinching themselves together.*

*Box, by the window, balancing the arrangement on his head like a pile of books, turns. Hope flickers like a lost and fading torch far off in the cavern of his eyes, then recognition, puzzlement, almost too brief to be seen. Then he is dead again, he is boring, he turns back to the window, he sinks into the sand and with them sinks their glee. They approach him, try talking to him—a few words from each of them in turn, then together they peck at him with his name, they poke at him with their long red fingers. He doesn't respond. They stand around him and exchange glances. They shrug and from their shrugging a game appears, each in turn shrugging, faster and faster, until they start laughing. But the laughter tires and they look again at the man they came to see, with his ridiculous arrangement on his head, like he poked his dumb head into an aviary and it got caught.*

*One of the three sees a chair in the corner of the room and puts it by the window, by Box.*

## AT SWAGGER'S

"Mike Swagger, Private Detective" was painted on the glass of the door. Childs' name didn't appear.

We went in to a small anteroom, where Marly sat behind her desk smiling sweetly. We took our hats off, \_\_\_\_\_ coughed into his hand and then used it to press down his hair and we walked over to her.

She smiled. "Mike told me all about you both, thank you so much for coming in." She spoke sweet and low, a sashay of a voice. It felt like she was blowing feathers at the back of your neck. It felt nice. There are those who say they've heard the voice of God, and I've never wondered what that would be like, but it occurred to me that there was nothing God could say that Marly's voice couldn't keep him in bed an hour longer. "Please just go straight in, Mike won't be busy for long," she said.

\_\_\_\_\_ opened the door through to the inner office and inside Swagger was sitting at his desk, in conversation with a guy, standing, who twitched nervously at our entrance, who looked like he twitched nervously at everything. Swagger gestured for us to sit in some green leather-padded chairs by the door and we sat and waited, our hats in our laps.

"Yes, it's a little jail time, Terrence," Swagger was saying, "but that's still a hell of a deal for you. We both know with a bit more sniffing around they could light you up like a firework, so why not make this easy for all of us and take the time? Sit it out. You've done it before, told me you taught yourself some Spanish when you were in. How's your Spanish now, Terrence?"

"I'm not going to jail!" Terrence screeched back. He had the stringy build of a snow fiend, his shirt was untucked, and from the back of his pants stuck a revolver that looked like it weighed twice what he did. He grabbed it and started waving it at Swagger. I looked over at \_\_\_\_\_ and he shrugged. We sat and watched. "I'm not going to no jail! You hear me, you *flatfoot*? I'm not going to jail over this." The gun was shaking in his hand like he was already rattling at his bars. Swagger sighed, slid open a drawer and lifted out his own gun. He placed it on the desk, but kept one hand on it.

"Terrence," he said calmly, "another day I'd have laid you flat already, but I'm in a good mood. I got guests here. Marly's wearing the sweater I got her for her birthday, and—you know what?—it suits her. But there's no way for you to walk away from this but you put down the gun. And then you've got to go to jail. Sit out your time. Everyone from heaven to the D.A.'s office knows you earned it."

"You ever had a chance to lay me flat you'd have done it," shouted Terrence, his teeth chattering and the big gun shaking in his hand like he was being frozen to death.

"I've had chances before, Terrence," said Swagger calmly. "You know what I haven't had before? The law on my side. But as long as you're waving that gat around I can put as many bullets in you as I like, and they're not going to take away my P.I. ticket, not even going to ask me how to spell your name properly I bet. You're just another scuzzball got taken out in the course of my peerless investigative work."

\_\_\_\_\_ tapped me on the leg. He wanted me to look at a picture hanging on the wall. It was a photograph of Mike Swagger, handsomely framed. Swagger was tipping his hat back with the barrel of his Colt .45 to show off his smile to the camera. It was nicely lit. He had signed it.

Behind the desk, with the same gun in front of him, Swagger continued negotiations. "Instead of that you're going to put the gun down, we're going to work out a confession for you to sign, and I'm going to make sure that they don't so much as *caress* a bruise onto you on your way to the cells. Okay Terrence?"

"N-n-no," said Terrence. "I can't sign no confession. They told me they'd p-pull out my throat, I said one word to the cops."

"P-pull out your throat?" Swagger asked. He sighed. "Well, I don't guess I can raise it," he said, "but I'll match it."

Terrence's gun rattled some more. Swagger smiled at us flatly from the wall, the one behind the desk looked more stubbled, tired, aggrieved. \_\_\_\_\_ yawned and crossed his legs.

Finally Swagger lost patience. "Goddammit Terrence," he said and his chair went back, the gun came up, and the barrel threw a loud blast of fire toward the ground, where it went through the coke's foot, and he went down howling. Swagger came round the table to the loud mess on the floor, and gargled its cries by pressing his foot against its neck. "What do you need a throat for anyway Terrence? This is the most I ever

heard you say for Christ's sake." Then he heeled it away, disgusted, and picked up the abandoned revolver. "I didn't need another hole in my floor, Terrence," he said, then, to us: "Sorry about this boys, won't take a second now."

\_\_\_\_\_ smiled, like he was having enough fun now not to mind waiting.

Swagger dragged the mewling Terrence with his punctured foot through to the anteroom by the hair. \_\_\_\_\_ and I got up to watch. Marly was standing watching too. She didn't seem to be finding it too unusual a show. Swagger cuffed the coke to a handle of a filing cabinet at shoulder height. Terrence was weeping curses and Swagger told him to keep it clean, and in a moment of hurt, angry clarity the coke managed to spit two words at Swagger. As he was saying the second of them Swagger's fist connected, slamming his head to the cabinet, and before Terrence dropped Swagger had caught his head in both hands and lowered him like the head was a bowling ball and he was in his run up. He left Terrence slumped on the ground with one arm up, like he couldn't decide whether to pass out or hail a cab.

"Sorry about that, kitten," Swagger said to Marly.

She smiled demurely. It was a hell of a smile.

Swagger came back in the room and sat down, slapping his hands on the desk and looking at us like we were a feast laid out for him. "Pull those chairs over here!" he said. We dragged them closer, with some effort and a fair amount of noise that drew Swagger's eyes down to the floor, and for a moment he looked somber. "That punk," he said. "Blood and holes. My floor doesn't need it." But his cheer came back to him quickly. "Childs should be here soon. Let me fill you in, now, though all on the qt, you understand." He took a cigar from a box, bit the end from it, took a lighter the size of a railcar from his desk and lighted it. He blew a couple of large, soft clouds. "Used to be this town was lousy with dicks, so much competition you could hardly shake up enough business to get by, but that's not the case any more. The city's low. It's good for business, sure, but it's a problem when you're a couple of hands short and could use an extra gum-heel. Childs and me thought you boys might fill a need, as it were," he said, turning the cigar in his hand as he spoke. "There's a case. More angles to this thing than the two of us together can keep on top of. More angles than a geometry textbook," he grinned at both of us in turn, making sure we got that one. "We need someone we can trust to go knock on some doors. Nothing complicated, just take a couple of names,

maybe ask a couple of questions and report back on the parties involved, be our eyes and ears on the ground.”

There came the noise of the outer office’s door. We turned awkwardly round in our chairs to see Childs come through from the anteroom. He took position by Swagger’s desk. As Swagger talked he took out a pouch of tobacco—reaching across his body to the pocket beneath the stump of an arm—laid the pouch on the desk, took a paper from it and started piling it with tobacco.

“There’s a strange bird in town. A Frenchman, by the name of Lowden,” Swagger continued, “or he says that’s what he’s called. Clarence Lowden, as in Lowden Cosmetics.”

Lowden Cosmetic makes creams, lipsticks, perfumes... Stuff so expensive you’ll almost believe it’ll do all they promise. Ruin marriages or save them, depending on your preference. Stop ageing for good. Turn back the wind.

“Clarence is the son and heir. All you have to do is confirm he is who he says he is. The case we’re working on, there are certain financial benefits that might accrue to Lowden, depending on how it all plays out,” Swagger said. “You’ll go to the apartment straight from here. You don’t need to alarm Mr Lowden, it’s not that kind of job, so don’t worry about being seen, that’s fine, you’re legit now. Don’t worry at all about being seen,” he said. “You don’t even necessarily need to speak with him.”

Childs turned the cigarette he’d been making with practiced delicacy, twisting an end. He put the pill in his mouth, a match from somewhere sparked on the inside of his thumbnail. As he lighted the twist of paper the stump of his shoulder raised in sympathy, moving the ghost of a hand to shield the flame.

“If this Lowden’s a phony...” Swagger let the consequences drift in the smoky air. He took his big feet from his desk and tossed a slim brown file into \_\_\_\_\_’s lap. “That’s a handwriting sample from the real Lowden.” \_\_\_\_\_ looked at it with glittering eyes like that was as good as tickets to the circus. “We don’t know what the real Lowen looks like, so that’s how you’re going to tell.”

### ONE OF THE THREE KILLED

*One of the three sees a chair in the corner of the room and puts it by the window, by Box. He sits in the chair. The other two hold their hands high to their chests in expectation. The first mimics Box's broken posture, his bulk and gloom. The two watching silently clap. But Box, an empty Box, could be asleep, could be dead, no reaction from old Box. Why did they come? They stand, the three of them together, and grow bored together. In retaliation they bore at Box with their fingers, prodding, tickling, bolder and bolder. They trace with a finger his nose, his ears; they flap the thin material of his smock. One tries to lift one of his big hands, but can't—he wipes imaginary brow-sweat and plays at digging his heels into the ground and lifting the hand again. One of the three, his thumb and index finger making an eager, twitching mouth, reaches out for a joint of the device, the mouth nibbles closer and closer. It touches the metal.*

*Less a roar than a scream of pain: there is a rupture, as some terrible pressure bursts from Box, he moves like a city wrenching itself from the earth, brutal and terrifying, his eyes exploded wide, his limbs wild, but he is still stiff-necked. The scream loud as a siren, he pounds against the figure that touched the device, with his fists he beats the nose from the face, he drives through the eyes with his thumbs and with his thumbs deep in the head his bloody hands grip the temples. He shakes the head and it whips the body that's limply attached, he screams and weeps and shakes the cracking, bleeding corpse.*

*The other two are silent, their mouths—like that of their dead brother, their image, their third—as tall as phone booths. Men in smocks have run into the room and do not know what to do. With their outstretched arms they make a ring, they move their feet, they are as scared as they have ever been in their lives.*

*Box drops the head and steps over the corpse. He sits in his chair by the window, and watches a fly outside. It beats itself once against the glass then rests on the peeling red paint of the frame. It lifts itself twice more and twice more its body bounces from the glass. It flies away.*

*Box's agitation subsides, his attention disperses.*

*He is not aware of the room behind him. The one body carried out. The two just like it escorted. The milk they coax him to drink, the tasteless powder dissolved inside it. The fearful dabbing of the man who cleans the grime and blood from his hands.*

*Box is waiting.*



## FINDING LOWDEN, AFTER

They walked with us most of the way to Lowden's, while \_\_\_\_\_ kept his arms wrapped around the file, clutching it to his chest. Swagger beside him, Childs out in front—fast and confident, even on his rubber hoof. Swagger gave \_\_\_\_\_ some final instructions, then they breezed.

When we got there we did as we'd been told: pressed the bell marked 'Fischer' and when the lock buzzed we went up. Fischer met us through a door that stayed chained. He looked us up and down like he was going to be measuring us for suits, then he passed Lowden's key to us. "Don't bring it back here," he said. "I don't want to know any more about it." And then he was gone.

We took the key along to Lowden's. The apartments didn't look like the sort that might house an heir to anything more desirable than rheumatism. When there was no answer to our knocks we let ourselves in.

There was a wall-bed that was up. There were a couple of chairs for receiving guests and one more beside a small flat-topped desk. There was a trunk pressed against the wall. And there was a body on the ground.

Fat Lowden was curled up, his eyes peacefully closed, his face a beautiful sky blue, one blue cheek pressed into the carpet. His neck was in the same state as Holcomb's had been. His rear-end was up in the air, so from his knees to his head he made a triangle packed with his big, round gut. His arms were splayed out.

He was in the very middle of the room, like he was on display, like he was art. He looked like a hermit crab that had just been embarrassed by the removal of its shell.

\_\_\_\_\_ gave an angry grunt, and for a moment I thought he was going to kick the corpse, but instead he started searching the room. He took the drawers from the desk and threw them on the ground. The first was empty, a long brass screw rattled in the second. He pulled down the wall-bed, and when that didn't achieve anything he pulled off the sheets. Then he lifted the bed up angrily, banging it against the wall, screaming at it, banging it again. Lowden had bare feet. I looked around for his shoes.

They were lying neatly by the desk. Meanwhile \_\_\_\_\_ was trying to lift the lid of the trunk but the whole trunk came with it, jumping clear of the ground, like it was trying to buck him. He took out his knife, jammed it in the lock of the trunk and tried to force it, but got nowhere. He flung the knife at the ground. He screamed, cursed, and now he did kick Lowden, right at the pitch of the triangle, and it seemed like it lifted him a full inch off the ground then put him right back down in the same ridiculous position, his blue face as serene as ever, like a deflating balloon on the string of that squeezed out neck.

I knew \_\_\_\_\_ was looking for something Lowden had written on. Something he could use to compare with the sample Swagger had given him. He'd been given a handwriting sample and now he'd been cheated out of it.

I wanted to help, so I started checking Lowden's trouser pockets. I took out a key ring with six keys on it, and a metal comb. Then \_\_\_\_\_ grabbed his jacket and I had to stand back. \_\_\_\_\_ started ripping it off him, shaking the body out of it, and then shaking everything from the pockets. There was a large handkerchief that flapped fragrantly into the room, some coins, a platinum watch on a chain, a fountain pen, an ivory sheaf of engraved cards, and a nearly empty package of violet pastilles. \_\_\_\_\_ roared with dissatisfaction, his hands on his head, his eyes wide and furious. While \_\_\_\_\_ was rending his hair I looked at the cards that were spilling from the sheaf. They said "Clarence Lowden". It didn't matter.

\_\_\_\_\_ took the key ring and went back to the trunk. The second key he tried opened it. I went over and stood with him as he burrowed through the layers of smartly folded clothes and towels. At the bottom, beside a .25 automatic with a walnut handle and a box of ammunition, was a stack of Hotel New Europe writing paper. \_\_\_\_\_ flung himself on the paper, "Yes, yes, yes," then immediately, violently, "NO NO," and he screamed at Lowden that it was blank, that it was all blank.

He grabbed Lowden by his shirt and shook him like he was going to make him talk, then punched him hard, knocking his nose sideways. Lowden didn't bleed: the dead don't bleed much.

\_\_\_\_\_ grabbed the pen and jammed it into Lowden's hand, his own hands encasing the dead man's like he was bringing comfort to him too late, then he pushed the pen down onto a sheet of the paper, trying to make a loop or a line that he might

match against the ones in Swagger's sample, but the paper bent into the carpet and tore, and \_\_\_\_\_'s hands tightened in anger, and a snapping came from Lowden's dead fingers. \_\_\_\_\_ roared angrily again, then finally seemed spent. He kneeled on the carpet with his head down. He said calmly, like it was the most obvious, disappointing thing in the world, that we had been wasting our time. And then stood up and wiped the hair back from his brow.

We went and ate without doing much talking. \_\_\_\_\_ muttered some about going back and stamping on Lowden's fingers. He still had the handwriting sample in its brown folder. After I'd finished my hamburger I took the single sheet of paper from it. Lowden's handwriting was small and tight. It was composed of a series of slanted vertical strokes, all neatly parallel and of precise length like an exacting illustrator's hatching, while prettily turned swoops connected them one to the other. It was on a piece of writing paper, cream-colored and thick as a sponge, that smelled softly of chypre. It read:

*13v. minimum*

*Operative loop, connected to adjusted loop via feedback correction*

*Correct for feedback w/ 2 ampere max load delay switch*

I put it back in the folder.

By then a lot of \_\_\_\_\_'s anger had left him, and he wanted to get milkshakes, so we went to another place, where he liked the milkshakes, and then we went back to Swagger's to tell the shamus what we'd found at Lowden's.

It was getting dark by the time we got there. Marly had her reading lamp as well as her smile both lit up when we walked in. Behind the communicating door, though, Swagger's office was dark. She told us that Swagger wasn't going to be back in, but he'd left a message saying we should come by again the next day, anytime before noon. It sounded so nice the way she said it that \_\_\_\_\_ had her repeat it. We were on our way out the door, when \_\_\_\_\_ stopped and said to her, "Someone had put the chill on that friend of his, kitten. Wrung him out until he would have choked on his own throat." The only response he got was a slightly raised eyebrow and two elegant teeth nipping the edge of a lip. She looked like he'd offered to buy her a drink and she was considering

it. Maybe this was how she always looked in grief. “Your boss might want the buttons involved,” \_\_\_\_\_ said. He got no reaction. He shrugged. “Maybe not.”

And we turned to go.

“See you in the morning, boys,” she said, and her voice lapped at us like a calm, tremendous wave.

## *HAPPY BEAR*

*A happy bear, isn't he? Such a happy bear. Are you comfortable happy bear?*

*He had woken up to her coming home. It was still light outside, he didn't mean to fall asleep, but it felt so good to have slept that he can still feel it now, so many years later, the tug of his muscles as he stretched them out, he can still feel the sheepish grin on his face, happiness spreads across him like muck, he beams through it. Hello there, happy bear. She sits on the bed beside him and he wraps his arms around her, pulls her into him as she laughs. She stops him while she kicks her shoes off, notices his are still on his feet and frowns, then climbs back firmly into him, takes his hands and pulls them across her. He kisses at the side of her neck, behind her ear. He turns on his back and she turns to him, an arm across his chest. He's going to get up and cook for them, he just wants to stay like this forever for a while, first.*

*Hello there. Happy bear.*

## ON THE STREETCAR, THE TRIPLETS

\_\_\_\_\_ went drinking. Like a lovesick young pup he went back to the same dive where he'd drunk with Swagger the night before. I wasn't in the mood to watch him drink, and if the dialogue heavy gumshoe did show then I knew I wouldn't be in the mood to listen. But I needed somewhere to be. This is always the thing, this is the tide we can't not swim against—that we all always have to find somewhere to be. You chew down the tiredness until the time it chokes you, you keep finding somewhere to be until you're excused, finally. Like Lowden had been excused. Like Holcomb had.

If I was going to carry on being somewhere, I decided it would be Evelyn Heydt's. \_\_\_\_\_ had already forgotten her, he'd found somewhere to be, for now, and it was sniffing at the heels of Swagger, hoping he'd get given a chance to have a hand grenade blow out his kidneys, or another handwriting sample. I wanted to see Evelyn Heydt.

At every stop on the streetcar more and more people got on. I felt like I was at the bottom of a garbage chute and ladies with grocery bags and squabbling kids were being dropped onto me. I got pushed further, tighter to the back. Then the redheaded triplets got on. In a line they got on, paid their fares and moved into the car, one, two, three.

I watched them for the rest of the journey. They hadn't seen me. They talked, looking forward rather than at each other, and as the car started to empty out again they moved, almost marching, around one of the vertical metal poles the same as the one I was holding on to.

The way they move started to make me feel queasy, the way their movements matched each other. They moved like three bottles carried by the same wave. As one of them turned the pole he stretched his arm out and peeled away from it, and stepped his big high-legged marching step to the window, his arm raised to a handle, and the second followed behind, the same turn, same big step back to the window and arm raised, and then the third, the movements passing one to the other like a finger runs along the keys of a piano, and from where I was watching they disappeared, one behind the other, like they'd been stacked inside each other. Only when the streetcar went around a corner

or reached a slope could I see that there was more than one of them, three identical images spreading apart then resolving into each other again. The triplet I could see, the one standing closest to me, was still talking, an undirected or inward muttering. Then in sequence they left the streetcar, like three bows on a single kite string they moved, one after the other.

It was as though seeing the first burned him into your eye, leaving other pale-headed redheads ghosting behind. As they muttered and moved I watched how they raised their hands and turned their feet around other passengers, the beating of their lips, and I couldn't see a difference between them. I couldn't shake the feeling I was seeing the same moment three times.

Once, in a wooden hut by a roller coaster, I'd seen a spinning toy lit by flashing lights. It was a cylinder of panels that showed a running horse with an Indian on his back, and the horse really did run, its legs drawn in pen but moving with flickering life, as the cylinder span and the flashing light controlled the time, taking the individual moments and making them into a single, living scene. Until the spinning slowed, and the horse separated into shuddering, sliding parts.

When the triplets had left a woman on the streetcar with a kind voice asked me if I felt all right because I was shaking.

## *A BURNING*

*He told her about the burning. Not Cansel, this was all much later. This was when they weren't together and he was angry with her for being without him and he thought he could hurt her by making himself disgusting to her. Showing her that she had loved a hideous man. He told her some of the terrible things he'd done. He told her how he'd hidden while \_\_\_\_\_ was killed. He told her how he'd burned the man. How the man's mouth had vomited.*

*His head didn't tip forward or his body bend toward the earth, the vomit just spilled from the mouth down his quaking chin, where it was met by the snot from his nose and the tears from his eyes, the mingling streams of that tormented face. The man was ringed at the body by the tire, his arms held tight to his sides. Bernard told Box he didn't have to do this and Box asked if he could do it. Bernard thought about it and said he could do it, no one would be sore at him for it, but maybe it wasn't something he wanted to do, maybe he'd regret it. Box said if he could do it then he wanted to do it, wanted to make his own choice. Box poured the gasoline into the dip in the rim of the tire, the single black endless tooth that bit inward into the man, whose face and beard were running wet. Box lit the gasoline and the gas burned and lit the tire, which burned and lit the man, which burned and lit the life, which burned up in a pillar of black smoke.*

*As the man burned he stumbled without falling, in all directions, like a ball in a pin game.*

*Box told her all this because he hated her for being without him and because he was sure they'd be together again. He wanted her and eventually his wanting her had always worked and then they were together again. So he shamed her by telling her this thing he'd done, because it wouldn't stop them being together and then, when they were together again, she would know how disgusting she was.*

*The reason she was so determined not to go back to him this time, though he didn't know it, was that she had found out she was pregnant. He made her afraid and ashamed, and whether they were together or not she could hardly stand anything any more. The only thing she felt sure of was that she had to hope and try to be brave enough to keep him away from her. This was what she was thinking about when he was describing to her the man's smell when he burned.*



## THE LOVE INTEREST SPILLS, A NOTE ISN'T LEFT

I pressed three bell-buttons together, none of them hers. The street door lock buzzed and I went in and up the stairs and stood at her door.

I imagined: knocking, the door opening, her seeing the look in my eyes, screaming maybe, backing away, almost tripping in her terror. The whole sorry scene playing out again. She would move back, scared, and I would move toward her like she was drawing me on a string. I would menace and she would retreat. And maybe it would end as it had before, with the big detective coming from nowhere to lay a sap on me, and her swept off in his arms. And maybe it wouldn't and no one would appear. Maybe Swagger was blind drunk in a bar with \_\_\_\_\_. Maybe he was sweeping other dames into his arms across the city, but not her. And maybe I'd scare her into giving up whatever money Holcomb had given her, maybe I'd twist her neck and put a hole in her chin, and pull her place apart looking for it and the debt would keep moving and we'd follow after it.

I shook my head to get the rain from my hat. I put the hat under my arm. I took my raincoat off and held the hat in my hand and hung the coat across my forearm. I straightened my tie and wiped my face and neck with a handkerchief, and tried to make the handkerchief a square for my breast pocket. Then again but folded the other way. Less dirt. I hung the raincoat and hat on the bannister and went over to the night-mirrored window. Imagine my face. The streetlights were like bare bulbs along the mirror in a star's dressing room. My face was an intrusion, a mistake. I hadn't shaved. I meant to do something to my hair, I raised my hands to do something but what are you meant to do to hair? It felt wrong to beat up on it without a plan.

I turned around and Evelyn Heydt was looking at me from her open door. I was somewhere now but by myself and without an idea what I meant to do there.

She looked a different person than she had the day before. She wasn't made of the same parts. The show we'd seen in the window, or the one through the long split up the side of that red dress, that was gone. She was not beautiful like the pulps this time, but she was beautiful, more so even. She wasn't a show at all, something seen, it wasn't a reflective beauty but something awake and aware. I hadn't shaved and she looked at me.

I tried to say something, but I wasn't sure where the words led and I swallowed the first of them as it started to grow. She waited for me and something like concern entered her. I could see it in her like she could see me struggling to make a word.

Before we waited for morning and me getting a sentence out, she said, "Is it about one of the girls? One of Jarecki's girls?" And I looked like however I look when I don't know what someone means, but she opened the door to me and had me sit and sat with me.

She was close enough I could see the color of her eyes as they saw me, and for some reason I thought I'm going to remember that color as best I can, I'm going to describe it to myself right now and I'm never going to tell anyone what color those eyes are. Her knee almost touched mine.

We sat for a while, both waiting for me to say something. I teetered, like a child liable to fall from some small but significant height. I shook my head, no, to the question she'd asked at the door. "We," I said. "It's," I said. I swallowed and coughed and said, my voice only slightly flooded with air, only slightly broken, "Holcomb. The writer."

I told her that was why we'd come. That Holcomb died owing money.

I lighted a cigarette without dropping it. She moved some cushions around like she was stirring sugar in her tea. She said she knew him. She'd known he was in trouble but not how much. She asked if I knew him. I shook my head, no. She said it was sad and with a look she made it seem it.

I wanted to know how they'd met but I didn't know how to ask it. The first way I tried I realised before the first word was all the way out that I'd sound like I was asking more than I meant, like I was asking her if they had been together, or if she was with someone else. I caught the word but not a sort of gasping cluck, and I tried again and the same thing happened. And she looked at me and there was something like surprise or curiosity—at seeing me foolish and clucking—but also sympathy and understanding.

"He came with a girl," she said, "the first time I met him. One of the girls from The Roll in the Hay." This is a place that operates under what Bernard calls Jarecki's *aegis*. "The girls from there know to come to us if they get in trouble. Not just from there, we'll always try and help anyone. Dr Boken, he's not involved, but we couldn't do it without access to the surgery, the drugs, and he turns a blind eye to all of that." She

looked at me curiously again. It could have been the look people give when they don't think you're understanding them, when they think you're not up to building with the bricks they're passing you. I know that look. This look was different to that—she was trying to see if I would use any of this in a way to hurt her. She said, “If we don't help they end up going somewhere that it's dangerous for them. It's better they come to us. God knows it's not perfect, but it's clean.”

She asked for a cigarette and I handed her one from the pack.

She reached toward me and her gaze took mine to check if it was all right as she picked my cigarette from my lips. She put its lit end to the unlit end of her own and inhaled, pulling the air—the breaths I'd been taking—back up the cigarette, through the flame, where they growled and chewed into her cigarette, and then up through it, into herself.

She handed back the cigarette. We sat and smoked without saying anything. She seemed relaxed now. To sit with her was something.

“I don't know what I can do for you,” she said. “I don't have his money—I don't have much money of my own.”

I shook my head no, because money wasn't what this was about, but then I wasn't sure what it was about.

I was going to ask about Swagger, how she had met him, and what she'd been doing away from work, why she'd been dressed up, why she'd been scared, but she stood and offered me coffee and I told her I'd like a glass of water and she left the room.

As soon as I was alone the feeling from the previous day came back, the being drawn forward, where sitting still was impossible, and I started to sweat. I didn't know what I was doing there and there was no one to tell me. From the direction of Evelyn Heydt came the sound of a running tap, and hearing it tore a strip straight out of me. I started like a man on his last day when the first of the voltage touches his rear, and I looked around and took a pencil and meant to write a note. It would just say that Holcomb's debt was hers, and that we'd be back. Then sometime I'd come and I'd bring \_\_\_\_\_ and things wouldn't go astray, then.

I took a magazine and wrote on the back cover, over an advert for cigarettes, but then I looked and the two had slipped together—the advert and the note—so it read:

## *Muscle*

“The road to what pleasure is thronged with Holcomb owed smokers who have you owe discovered this better cigarette.”

I dropped sweat all the way out the door, I pushed the magazine into my pocket, I got out of there.

In the street I left my hat off so the rain could cool my face.

gave up knocking and took his notebook from his pocket. He turned to the center and wrote across it in large letters, "YOU THERE DICKIE?" then tore out the sheet, folded it in half and slid it partway under the door. He made the noises of a man walking away, turned his shoulder toward the door and quietly waited. In a few seconds there came the sound of movement in the office and the note slipped from sight.

"I guess that answers my question," Swagger muttered, and threw himself into the door. The collision threw Dickie onto his back like an upturned turtle on the threadbare carpet of the office. Swagger lifted him up, and only once he'd got him into the chair at his desk did the old man start to mewl. Some of the long, thin white hair he used to try and cover his scalp had fallen over his face. It stuck to some blood coming from his nose and to tears forming at a rheumy eye.

"Mike," he wept. "I always liked you. I liked you almost as much as I like that knockout frail of yours. And you do this to me. I don't think I can see Mike. I rely on these eyes."

Swagger handed Dickie a handkerchief. "Your nose Dickie," he said.

"Huh?" asked Dickie, and Swagger gestured. Dickie dabbed his nose. "You near croaked me Mike."

"You should answer when someone knocks on your door, Dickie. You run a business here, don't you?"

"If I can't see Mike, outta these eyes..."

"As long as you can talk, Dickie. Tell me about the package."

"I get an awful pain in the eyes, and a knock like that—"

"Save it. Tell me—"

"My eyes, and—"

Swagger kicked at the chair, knocking it off its front legs and tipping Dickie back into the desk, almost spilling him out of it, and almost shaking all the magnifiers and tweezers from the desk. He grabbed the old man's collar. "Maybe I'm not making myself clear Dickie, but you tell me what the ghoul's been chasing and you'll tell me fast, or that old mother of yours'll outlive you yet, you hear me Dickie?"

"Mike!" said Dickie, like he'd never had his honor insulted before. "I always tell you all I can. But I don't know nothing about this. I saw the ghoul, sure—" Swagger swiped the other two legs out from beneath the chair and Dickie cracked his head on the desk on the way to the ground. He clutched at it and his squeal turned into, "Iiiiit's a mask!"

"What kind of mask?"

"A Colombian funerary mask. A gold Colombian mask."

"Gold."

"Yeah, but that's not even the thing Mike," he said. He was getting excited at the thought of it, his wet eyes glistened with desire for this mask. "It's the craftsmanship. There can't be another like it anywhere in the world, Mike. The eyes are closed, and the expression on the face is just, I don't know, sublime. There's a trail of bodies, Mike, all across the globe, people who've been trying to get their hands on this mask. It was lost for hundreds of years, and then suddenly it's found at the scene of a murder in London. The cop in charge of the case spirited it off, till he was found hung by his belt in a bathroom stall in eastern Europe, and the mask gone. Years later it was stolen for the royal family in Spain, soon as it reached them, there was a revolution. I been told it triggered it: the whole thing, a country on fire for two years, just to cover for this one pinch. It's here now Mike."

Swagger lit a cigar while he thought. "You've seen this

## GIVEN CANSEL

\_\_\_\_\_ wasn't around when I got back to my mattress. He was out drinking or he was out rolling in the hay, whatever it was. I couldn't sleep, I just kept walking in circles like I was flattening the grass, thinking about Evelyn Heydt, and her knee almost close enough to touch mine, Evelyn Heydt taking my cigarette and pulling my breath back through it. I went to Lydia's door, hoping there would be a light coming from it and I could talk to her. I'd missed talking to her, with the apartment manager still no one knew where, and her dirty jokes and everything lively in her gone with him.

There was no light, and I imagined her on the other side of the door, shrinking, shrinking smaller and further into her sheets until she was wrinkled and pale and more bedsheet than she was person. I went to knock anyway—I couldn't imagine that she was asleep, because I couldn't imagine her sleeping, not the Lydia she'd shrunk into, like I couldn't imagine her singing, or flying, or awake, so I didn't think I'd be disturbing her to knock. But then I didn't know what we could say to each other if she answered, so I didn't knock. I went and lay down.

I fell asleep, I must have, because \_\_\_\_\_ woke me, the noise of him pissing so loud it sounded like it was striking the mattress beside my head.

And I fell asleep again, because Swagger shaking our door almost to parts woke the two of us.

I pulled on a shirt and opened the door while \_\_\_\_\_ started up his hacking cough, with the thundering phlegm—the rattling of the cage. When it was done Swagger, talking around me to \_\_\_\_\_, who wasn't in the room, said loudly, "There's another job for you. Another strange bird to find, name of Cansel."

\_\_\_\_\_ called back, "Lowden's dead."

Swagger took that as an invitation to come in. "Don't worry about Lowden," he said. "Not many people are going to miss him. You did exactly what you were meant to do."

We dressed and he walked with us to the Ambassador Hotel. "You're going to wait in the lobby," he said to \_\_\_\_\_. "Wait there until you see me come and give you

the nod, then you go up to Cansel's room. He's in room 222. Room..." He stopped walking as his voice tailed off. He turned to \_\_\_\_\_.

"222," said \_\_\_\_\_.

We started walking again. "Room 222," said Swagger. "Jeno Cansel will be out, but he's travelling with a large trunk, and it's the trunk we're interested in. You go up to the room, but take the stairs, not the elevator, and you say nothing to anybody about why you're there. Once you're in, check the trunk for a package. You ever seen a baby wrapped up so tight it looks like it just came in the mail? This is going to be that size, but a lot more precious."

We'd reached the Ambassador. Swagger lit another cigar. "You'll know it when you see it. No need to open it, just take it and leave the same way you came. Go take a seat, boys." As we went into the hotel he called out, "Room 222, boys."



## HECTOR AND POLLY

*The second time he comes to see Box he brings his wife. He had failed, after seeing him for the first time, to keep from her where he had been. She didn't get it out of him, didn't question him or pick up on some display of nerves or notice anything amiss; he didn't rush out his lie, didn't overfill it with too many props, too many boys being chased by bicycles. He came home and wasn't asked to lie. She just brought him the dinner she had been cooking and kissed him on the forehead and never asked where he'd been. Then, almost a week later, he told her. She had been sewing up his work trousers, and she stopped and looked at him. She looked so hurt he couldn't stand it.*

*Why would you bring it up? she asked.*

*It's not up already? he said. We don't both think about her? She put down her sewing.*

*So let's go then, she said. If that's what you think we should do let's go there and see him. He told her he wasn't saying that, but she kept saying that he'd thought he should go so then she should be with him. Why had he suddenly changed his mind? The only thing that kept her from getting her hat and leaving right then was that he agreed that they would go, but told her that they'd have to go the next day, during visiting hours.*

*As they got into bed that night he couldn't get her to look at him.*

*Now they stand at the door, the two of them, looking in at Box, by the window, exactly as he was before. Head caught in the same trap. Forlorn and unmoving. He has told her on the walk about how Box looks, he has tried to prepare her—for the thing, the device on his head, particularly. He knew there would be a lot for her to go through, and this one small thing, the strangeness of the sight, this he thought he could try and prepare her for. They stand in the open door. She has folded her arms, she holds herself. What does it do? she says. I know you said it doesn't do anything. What does he want it to do?*

*He wants it to take back what he's done, he says.*

*She looks so angry. How dare he, she says. He killed her, and now he wants her back again? She spits across the threshold onto the floor of Box's room. She says, He put his hands on her and made it so I couldn't even recognize my girl inside of what he'd done to her. She's crying. She says, He took her and he took our beautiful little boy, and he gets another chance? She spits again. Why does he get to*

## *Muscle*

*hope for anything, why does he get to still be here?*

*She leaves.*

*He goes and sits with Box. There are birds that have made a nest above the window. He watches them.*

## THE LOBBY OF THE AMBASSADOR

We sat in the elegantly crumpled seats in the lobby. They were this kind of seat: you sank into them for a long time, like you were a grand old ocean liner, and they smelled so good I could hardly bear it.

A much less elegantly crumpled man sat nearby, busily attending to not watching us with the aid of a newspaper. This was the house peeper. His shoulder rig and his hairline were both too high. We watched him.

We watched him without the subterfuge with which he watched us. We watched him and he boiled under it. In less than the time it took for the band on the radio to change song, his bottom lip was slick with sweat.

Whether Swagger appeared and gave his nod or not, we got to sit watching this old house pepper, with a delusional sweep of hair and a well-combed moustache and a holster that had never been separated from its gun, and it felt good.

We watched him for as long as it took \_\_\_\_\_ to smoke three cigarettes. We watched him for so long he had, finally, to do something one way or another.

He folded his newspaper and walked over to us tapping it against his leg. He coughed. He asked us if we were waiting for somebody or maybe we were just keeping out of the rain.

His moustache twitched like a car veering into oncoming traffic. He knew he'd waited a long time before asking us and the cowardliness bothered him.

\_\_\_\_\_ grinned and extinguished his cigarette in the cigarette stand beside his seat. I stood and the peeper took a half step back and I matched him. He said something that turned into a burst of tuts and gasps, like his tongue was tumbling down a flight of stairs in the back of his throat, and shuffled like he was thinking of reaching for his gun.

I grabbed onto his jacket with my left hand, and the holster and the gun with it, wadding it all in place. The hotel peeper fingers slipped wetly around mine. He tried to take another step back and I held him where he was. He didn't swing at me or look me in the eye or give any clue that he thought I had anything to do with why he couldn't get a hold of his gun, why he wasn't getting to act like a man ought to act, why he couldn't

keep charge of his own hotel lobby. He just feebly picked his fingers at mine, limply waving off a spider he'd woken to find on his chest.

Then \_\_\_\_\_ was at my side before you'd have noticed him approach. While the peeper shivered in my grip, \_\_\_\_\_ began unfolding his knife from his pocket and its handle. He did it slowly, while the peeper's eyes darted from it to me—now he was looking at me, anxious, pleading—and to his fumbling hands on the wad of cheap suit where the gun was fixed.

Then there was Swagger, appearing as suddenly as \_\_\_\_\_, inserting himself between me and the peeper like he was breaking in to take the next dance. "You're looking a little rattled Glenn," Swagger said. "You holding it together? A hotel dick's got to look the part for his establishment or people start to talk." And like that I'd been eased off—declared done and peeled from the griddle. \_\_\_\_\_ tipped his knife into itself and returned it to its pocket, and with a hand on each of the peeper's shoulders, Swagger moved him back, put us at arm's length from him, and we stood like a group of friends well on the way to becoming good acquaintances.

Swagger brushed at the crumples in the peeper's suit. "Sleeping in your car again, Glenn?" he asked. "Just say the word if you need a bed until you get back on your feet. You can take mine while I go share with that pretty wife of yours." Swagger laughed loudly.

The hotel dick wiped his brow and his chin with his pocket square and tried to climb his tongue back up into his mouth using the other detective's name for steps. "Mike, Mike," he said, "Mike, it's good to see you, Mike."

"Always good to see you Glenn, and to visit a high class establishment like this, where I've never seen so much as a lick of trouble and never expect to neither. And these two boys," Swagger said, turning to us, laying his arm across the wilted hotel detective, "do you know these two boys?"

"N-no, Mike," said the peeper, finally with the courage to look at us angrily, a couple of heels, lousing up his lobby.

"Well, they look like they've probably got some business to attend to, don't you boys?" Swagger leaned forward. He loomed. He was meaningful. "Don't you have some business to attend to boys?"

We walked toward the door. Behind reception a skinny, fair-skinned boy, open-

mouthed, with an Adam's apple like a doorknob, watched us, had been watching the whole thing without ever having a thought to do anything but watch. Swagger whistled a note and called him over by name and the kid trotted obediently past us in his direction. Swagger had already sat his friend Glenn with his back to us, so with the kid gone, we just kept walking past the exit and up the stairs.

## *HECTOR AND THE SON OF A BITCH*

*When he comes to see Box now he comes alone. He sits with him. Eventually he talks to him. He tells him about his own past, how he used to be. He never talks to his wife about these things. She knows some of them though. She saw enough of them, enough that it burns him to think about. Then when they were going to get married, that was when everyone she knew began to send her letters and tell her things, everything they knew that he had done and all the things they'd heard he had. It scared him. He tried to move the wedding forward. That got her angry, there was no changing her plans. They got married the day they'd always meant to. Two of her brothers didn't come. She never spoke to them again.*

*He tells these things to Box, and never gets a sign that he's been heard, but he tells them anyway. Sometimes he talks about people he used to know, like the son of a bitch.*

*I used to know two men, he says. They would drink in the one bar I had left that would still take my money. One was the meanest son of a bitch you ever saw, the other the absolute sweetest. They'd been friends their whole lives, like brothers to each other, who didn't have none, though how we could never figure out. One day the mean one, after a whole life being cruel to the world, somehow he finally got to the soft one. This sweet boy, almost the size of you, finally snapped. He stood over him and he brought a bottle down on the son of a bitch's head three times. On the third it stood there, upright, sunk in his head. There was a shard went the length of your hand through the top of his skull right down, he tapped his own head with two fingers to show. Through the middle. We just about fell out ourselves when we saw it. The son of a bitch just looked shocked. He sat on the ground blinking, feeling around the bottle like he was trying to find a light switch. They took him to the hospital like that, and he walked with them, the bottle still there. He had to bend his knees to get through the door. His friend, they took him out in handcuffs. By the end of the week, they were both back. Except after that the cruel one, he was the sweetest, sweeter even than the other kid, his friend. Good tempered, charitable as a nun. His wife left, said she couldn't recognize him any more and he kept giving away all their money to anyone who asked. That's how deep that piece of glass cut him. It was like a word had been crossed out on a sheet of paper. Everyone said after that he was a different man. The son of a bitch just got cut away and left someone else.*

*I wish it could have been that easy for me.*

## ROOM 222, A CUT

\_\_\_\_\_ popped the lock of room 222 with his knife.

We saw Cansel immediately. He was in the bed, covered with a sheet.

Immediately we knew it—before we even saw the bloody stain, we knew. It wasn't, I guess, hard to know by then. I closed the door. \_\_\_\_\_ pressed his hands to his eyes. He cursed. We were getting the corpse tour of the city: come and see it, lifeless worthless death. See it, hear it, talk with death see if it does you any good. Let the bodies pile up like dumb sacks of grain.

Everywhere we walked our path was already flat and dead, and by steps I'd grown sick of walking it. \_\_\_\_\_ took his hands from his eyes. He cursed. I stretched my shoulder and watched the torn seam of my jacket yawn. \_\_\_\_\_ cursed and cursed.

Cansel's body made a long, low mound in the bed sheet. It was pulled up past the top of his head, pulled up so far that feet in expensive shoes stuck from the bottom end. The blood made an oval like a red rug that hung off one side of him, stuck to his gut by two darker red pits the size of ashtrays.

We walked toward him.

\_\_\_\_\_ stood at one corner of the bed and I stood at another and between us were Cansel's feet, sticking from their shroud.

\_\_\_\_\_ positioned a cigarette in his fingers by tapping it against the closer shoe.

The mound coughed and there was a crack like an explosion from the bed that clapped across my ears and knocked all sense out of me. The bed was on fire. The bloody mound was on fire, it had coughed and now it was on fire. There had been a gunshot and one part of the sheet, the part that was on fire, was waving around, was a long arm, waving, it held a gun and there had been a gunshot. The explosion, the shot, had rung a gong in my head, rung an impossibly high note, insistent and central. The arm was flailing—it held the fire, though the fire was spreading, and it held a gun.

The high note drilled at me from inside but it was fading. We had both crouched as though we had thought for an instant to run. Cansel's body had been holding a gun, had shot the gun, and the shot had caused the fire. And maybe we had, for an instant,

thought to run. Now he was trying to shake loose the burning sheet, but he was caught in it and started to scream. His body rolled and his arm shook, and the sheet moved down his face, just far enough that we could see his eyes, which were wide with screaming. We stood straight and watched him flail. The flapping arm, lengthened by the gun, was like a wing made of fire, of a flame that spread with every beat.

Cansel's body screamed and rolled from side to side, but he was still caught and a lot of the bed was burning, covered in flapping flames.

\_\_\_\_\_ put the cigarette in his mouth and lifted a match to light it. There was a second explosion from the long arm, again we had our hands to our ears, we crouched like we might run, and the shot, again, missed us. \_\_\_\_\_ was quick. He screamed at the screaming Cansel, and made for him. He had dropped his cigarette and his knife was out. He stabbed it into the mound, his arm dashing into the flame, punching the screaming Cansel with the little blade, he put one hand over the wide eyes and with the other drove the blade into the sheet and the covered head. Cansel's screams became louder and filled with water and then stopped as \_\_\_\_\_ stabbed at the head and neck through the pattern of slits, the red mouths he'd already made with his knife. I had moved closer, to stop him or to help, and I put a hand out toward him.

The sleeve of \_\_\_\_\_'s jacket caught the fire and he reeled, his knife slicing my palm. He got the jacket off and beat it against the still, heavy mound that had been Cansel until there was no more fire anywhere.

There wasn't much smoke, but it carried the smell of Cansel's burning.

The blood spread and soaked round the cuts in the head and neck of the shroud, and the sheet clung closer until we could make out features—the angle of Cansel's cheekbone, the rise of his nostrils, the long coastline of his open mouth—all cast in rich red.

There was no trunk, no package like a tightly wrapped baby.

A knock came from the wall by the head of Cansel's bed, at about the place of the open-mouthed red mask that lay there, as if they were rapping on his head to wake him. And then three more knocks. Someone shouted, indistinctly. They hadn't shouted before, unless they had been shouting while Cansel was screaming and the gong's high tone was vibrating through our heads. \_\_\_\_\_ yelled back, cursed at the voice, indistinctly



too, and there was another knock, this one from the door. \_\_\_\_\_ came around the bed to get Cansel's gun. The skin of Cansel's arm had melted to the sheet and \_\_\_\_\_ separated them with difficulty. There was a long .38 in Cansel's grip. \_\_\_\_\_ picked the fingers from it and took it. The knock at the door came again and now a voice called for Mr Cansel. He didn't answer.

I thought about opening the door, letting whoever was outside into the room, to see what would happen. Something to get us off this dead path, so there would be no more getting sent by Swagger to inspect corpses or kill them again while they screamed at us with wide eyes. I was sick of it. But I put the chain on the door and went to the window, which was large and already partway open. As I pushed it all the way up, my left hand slipped from the blood on my fingers and I jarred my elbow hard against the window frame. I'd been cut, I remembered. Out of the window it was maybe a fifteen-foot drop to the roofs of a line of off-duty cabs. I showed \_\_\_\_\_.

There was another knock on the door, but no louder, and another shout for Mr Cansel, another shout just as low on courage. It was the same hesitant half-voice from the hotel lobby—the voice of the hotel peeper, still unsteady on its feet. He was waiting. He'd wait until the prowl car boys arrived if he could. We had time.

\_\_\_\_\_ threw the gun back onto the bed and jumped across the window so the front half of him tipped into the open air while the back half wriggled in a hotel room where a man had just been shot, burned and stabbed. He turned his body around so he hung outside, attached to the building by his fingertips. Then he dropped onto the hack beneath. He managed it quietly, gracefully even. The sounds of a conversation came from the corridor: the hotel dick explaining to someone, one of Cansel's neighbors maybe, why it would be indiscreet just to open up the door and see what was going on in the room, whatever the noise, and yes, however bad the smell was.

I looked at Cansel and followed \_\_\_\_\_ through the window.

I landed badly, denting the roof of the hack and bending my ankle as I tipped unavoidably onto my side, my hip going into the hood, my shoulder into the windshield, and then fell, kept falling, off the hood and into the ground. There was no one around in this alley but me and \_\_\_\_\_. No one ran toward my noise. \_\_\_\_\_ helped me to my feet, he picked up my hat and brushed gravel from my knees with it, windshield glass from my

shoulder. I was sick of it all and my knees hurt and I could have been anywhere else. I grabbed \_\_\_\_\_ by his lapels and shook him. He hung there, not objecting, and I shook him again.

My voice was bad. It comes and goes and it was bad now. I said, "He's go ing to keep push ing us a round." The vocal chords, what happens is that they can't close, so air escapes through the voice. When, it's bad—right now, it's bad—I sound like a leaky bellows. It tremors too, when it's bad. I shook \_\_\_\_\_. I said, "Push us a round until we 're spent, then hand us to the buzz ers." I breathed, and shook at \_\_\_\_\_. "And they 'll light us up." I put \_\_\_\_\_ down so I could put my hands around the pain in my neck. I bent toward the ground and he laid a hand on my back. I could feel the blood from my cut hand running into the collar of my shirt.

I shook his hand from my back and stood straight, taking my hands from the pain. "I get lit up, it's go ing to be for some thing I chose," I said. When the voice gets bad the struggle with it reaches my eyes too. It makes people think I'm angry, or upset. "Not some pho ney pinch I got made for."

I took a while to breathe. \_\_\_\_\_ waited. There was still no one with us in the alley, no one at the window. I said, "I've got some where else to be," and left him.

## *THE OTHER PHONE CALL*

*Hector remembers the night he was woken by that phone call. Years ago, strange to think.*

*He had met the man on the other end of the line only once before—he remembered opening the door one Sunday and there was this man the size of a bridge, a crushed hat pressed to his chest.*

*While the man on the phone talked, his bulk filled Hector's memory. He'd wondered if his house was going to fill up with these men, and thought how it wouldn't take many. He couldn't remember the man's name, but he remembered you could see he how hard he was working at being polite, that he wouldn't come in, wouldn't take a beer, just asked for Box and the two of them left together.*

*Hector remembered that nose, squint on the face like a curtain tugged closed too sharply. Then the name, Bernard.*

*On the phone Bernard was saying something about Box. Hector told him, as far from still-sleeping Polly as the cord on the telephone would let him and keeping his voice low, Box isn't here, but Bernard wasn't asking that. He kept saying he was sorry, that he'd forgotten her name. He had something to tell him and he couldn't remember her name.*

*He said, I got to tell you, this terrible thing, and here I can't even remember her name, god though I'm sorry.*

## GETTING THE MONEY

I went to \_\_\_\_\_'s and got the small folding shovel he kept under the sink. I went down to the small patch of dirt land to the back of the building. I kept a tin box there, buried close to the wall.

It hurt to dig and I got dirt in my cut, but I didn't feel like taking the time to deal with it. The box wasn't buried deep and didn't have a lock but no one had touched it. I counted from the stack of bills inside and took a bit more than half, then reburied the rest and went to Jarecki's.

The waitress gave me a look with so much distaste she had to lay it on slowly, like layers of paint. It worked its way from my head to my shoes and then back up.

She got Bernard. He was white to me and sent her back to watering down complimentary drinks. I told him I had to speak to Fylan, and he just took me to him and didn't ask any questions. It was real white of him.

Fylan was standing by the door to the back room, watching the gaming floor. He said, "You're going to scare the marks, coming in here looking like you look, Box. Go home." I shook my head, no. Now he turned to me, and looked me in the eyes. He turned and went into the office, and I followed him. He sat behind the desk and took a cut glass decanter of something clear and poured some into a paper drinking cup he took from his desk. He drank it while he looked at me, then poured himself another, and one more in a second cup from the same place.

He pushed the second drink toward me and told me to sit down. "You know you've got dirt and blood on your collar? You cut yourself shaving?" he asked. "I always took you for part golem." I took the little paper cup and drank it down. Sitting made me wince. I had to lay the leg I'd twisted out straight.

Fylan sighed. "What is it, Box? Why are you here? Where's \_\_\_\_\_?"

I said, "I've got the money that Holcomb owed."

## TEETH

I didn't go there to tell her not to worry about the debt. She wasn't worried about it, she would never hear about it. I went there because I wanted to be near to her, and she let me sit with her, and when I spoke, she waited for me to get out the little I had to say. In her bathroom I washed the cut—and the blood and dirt from myself—as well as I could. There wasn't much I could do about the shirt, but the water was good and hot and steamed the mirror and made my face shine pink and bright. She gave me a bandage, and when she saw how badly I'd wrapped the cut she laughed at me, beautifully, and she undid what I had done and did it better, did it right.

I asked her about her job and she talked to me about it. She seemed to know everything there was to know about teeth. There's a lot to know about teeth, you'd be surprised. She asked to see mine and then frowned when I showed them to her. I must have looked pretty worried, because she laughed at me then, too. She got me to open my mouth again and then she tapped on one of my teeth. She said it was squint. I'd never noticed it. If it was pulled the rest would have more space and it would all straighten out. "Don't get it pulled though," she said. "I like your smile. You shouldn't change it." My smile was big and dumb and I couldn't stop it, not for minutes.

I sat with her and I thought how I wanted to be there, not just then, but whenever I could be useful to her. I wanted to be there to unstitch myself and patch her up anytime she needed it. I wanted to be there when there was nothing for us to do or say, and I wanted that to be long lazy years. The world could keep screwing itself deeper into all that nothingness unattended. I wanted to watch the outer edges of her eyes as her laugh wore wrinkles there—it would be a good way to spend the time, to see the things she might laugh at become a part of her beauty.

And I didn't need to say any of this, to struggle out a breathy, painful word of it. Like a miracle, she knew it. Somehow the good thoughts burned bright enough to be

seen through all the rest of me, and they brought her hand into mine and we sat like that, hand in hand.

I found myself remembering things I hadn't thought about for a long time, and I sat there remembering them, forgetting where I was. I remembered being in a car with \_\_\_\_\_, though I couldn't remember where we had got the car or where we were taking it, but \_\_\_\_\_ was driving and he drove very well. There was a peacefulness to him while he was driving, and I closed my eyes to see if I could feel the car moving as he drove because he was driving so smoothly, so gracefully, I wanted to see if I could tell without looking when we were turning a corner, when we came to a stop. Except I fell asleep, in the car, and I fell asleep in the memory too. Evvie woke me, she was going to go to bed and I was going to have to leave. She said to call her before I came round next time, and I smiled so big at that, the smile all over my face all at once like an egg cracked into a pan. I got her to kiss me on the cheek at the door, and she kissed me once on the cheek, and then quick on the lips, and before I could even smile she had closed the door.

## *HECTOR AND BOX*

*He keeps visiting. He brings something to read, for when he doesn't feel like talking. When a kid comes in, he sees Box stir and turn—Not today Box, nothing—and then sink again.*

*Once, after a long time of him coming and never any trouble from Box, one of the kids in smocks interrupts his reading and asks if he'd mind—and holds out the milk he's brought. Hector feels like punching the kid in the jaw. No, he says, I'm not doing that, sorry. The kid seems surprised but shrugs it off, and goes through the routine himself, tipping the milk into Box's mouth, careful of how he does it, trying to catch all that flows back out in a yellowing rag. Too angry to read, he watches the kid in the smock work.*

*When the kid leaves he pulls his chair closer to Box and looks through the mesh of the device into Box's eyes, though he's never found him there.*

*I hate you, he says. I hate you so much it hurts me to be in here with you. I can only make it through the door into this room because I hate myself so I put up with how it hurts, but it hurts being near you.*

*He taps Box on the knee with his magazine. My wife wishes you were dead.*

*He goes back to reading.*

## PREPARATIONS

I interrupted their preparations. They were sitting at \_\_\_\_\_'s table with their sleeves rolled up high, their fingers tipped oil-black. Before them on the table and reflected in their eyes were barrels, chambers, firing rods, ammunition—the guts and grease of guns, maybe half a dozen guns, maybe more. Swagger was holding a chamber, a black glistening beetle that he'd run through with a long brush, piercing one of its five eyes. Childs' hand was turning and polishing a trigger guard with a cloth. Between them was \_\_\_\_\_ holding a shotgun stock. He was looking at the spread laid out before him on a sheet like a picnic, looking greedily, like he couldn't wait to take these guts in his guts, like he'd eat them up until he was lead-bodied, until he could spit bullets wherever Swagger pointed him.

“Take a seat, Box,” said Swagger. “We’re getting ready. Things are about to break.”

I didn't take a seat.

“Take a seat, Box.”

I didn't take a seat.

“Take a seat.”

I didn't.

Childs stood. He took a Colt Super Match from the table and walked over to me. His hoofed leg was a corked gun barrel. He was holding the Colt backwards, shaking hands with the barrel, and he knocked its handle against the back of my cut hand. I kept my arms by my side. Childs' breath rose like steam into my face. “Take the gun,” he said, and rapped my hand with it again, and again. He struck downwards, the inside of the butt against my knuckles, scraping them. My fist clenched against it and I felt the blood start to run from my palm again into the bandage. The stub of Childs' missing arm rose up, aroused, like it wanted to force my hand open or grip my neck. The gun's handle swiped my hand again.

“Things are about to break,” said Swagger. I looked at \_\_\_\_\_. The knuckles of my hand hurt and the palm was bleeding. “A friend of Lowden's is going to come calling,” Swagger said, “a friend of Lowden and Cansel—Dickie's his name. We're going to be



ready. Things are about to break. Take a seat, Box.”

“ \_\_\_\_\_,” I said, “let’s go.”

Swagger sighed and pushed his chair back from the table. Before he stood, \_\_\_\_\_ was up, was standing beside Childs, no one moved like \_\_\_\_\_. He took the gun from the cripple, who backed off.

\_\_\_\_\_ cradled the gun in his hands and when he spoke he spoke to it. When \_\_\_\_\_ spoke—when he wasn’t screaming or threatening death or cursing and spitting teeth, when he was just talking—he always sounded like a boy. “Box,” he said, “there’s Dickie, and he’s coming here. Things are about to break.”

I didn’t know what to say. We’d been pulling at the same yoke for so long I didn’t know how to move without him. “They j u st want— They’ll cop you.”

Swagger was always his own fanfare, he filled the room when he talked, drew all eyes to him like he was as important as gravity, as pointless to resist. “Because of the fire? Is that what this is?” he asked. “That you burned Cansel? They found him—burned, his face in pieces...” Swagger was in a vest but still had his hat on. He ran his thumbs the height of his suspenders and let them snap against his chest, then rubbed and slapped at his belly like at a family dog. “Don’t worry about that. That was just some quick thinking, on your part. Cansel’s dead,” he said. “The rest is just color.” He walked so close to me we were both sharing his hat’s brim. “There’s one more job for you boys. One more job to get this whole thing tied up, so take a seat Box.”

I took myself out from under Swagger’s hat. I couldn’t manage any more words but I looked at \_\_\_\_\_ and held out my hand to him, the cut, bandaged hand. Part of me thought he’d take it just to hurt the cut, to punish me for the gesture. He just looked greedily into his gun. I made for the door.

I waited for them outside, and when they left I tailed them.

should be glad they're on the way, Dickie. I don't think you killed Cansel, like I don't think you killed Lowden, but you're looking like a loose end about now, and loose ends don't seem to last too long in this thing, do they?"

Dickie couldn't make his eyes match Swagger's. He rubbed at his elbows like he meant to put another hole in the patches there, and said to the walls, "I'll take my chances."

"I don't like them, but then I've soured on you a bit too, Dickie, and I'd be happy to see you try. I could walk out of here and let you get tidied away—it'd be an easier job for your friend than taking down Cansel," Swagger said. "Cansel was plenty tough, but no one's so tough they can take being stabbed in the head a dozen times. Being burned alive. Shot twice. Still, you want to push your chips in and take your spin that would be okay with me. Except that Cromarty's getting restless. He needs somebody with a pulse to fix bracelets on or he's going to be the shortest serving Police Commissioner this town ever saw. He's started eyeing me for the fit, so that puts you up against me, Dickie." Swagger pressed his finger into the old man's scrawny chest. "It doesn't matter how good I think you'd look with a few more holes in your head, or your neck squeezed tight, you're going to talk, Dickie, when Cromarty gets here you're going to sing out good, you're going to sing out like you were born for the stage, because if you clam up now Dickie, that puts *you* against *me*. And you don't want that Dickie. You want to do everything you can to make sure we're on the same side or that sweet mother of yours might outlive you after all." Dickie Chase never said another word. A bullet from a .45 took out a quarter of his skull, and almost caught Swagger on the jaw on its way into the

mantel. Swagger hit the floor and rolled to cover.

By the time he had his gun out, Childs was already throwing shots from behind a shoulder-height safe. He fired them out through the window, where, in the darkness, someone on the fire escape was shooting at them.

There was no shouting between the explosions of the three guns. Slices of quiet night stood between the noise like hung sheets of ice.

Dickie's corpse groaned, his fingers scratching twitchily at the thin carpet, where his head's red muck and broken china was scattered.

Suddenly the figure on the escape clattered down toward the ground. Swagger was close on his tail, leaping through the window and down. Before he made the last jump to the ground he watched to see which way the figure ran. He knew the man, knew him even without his knife, without seeing the scar on his chin, or that sneer of his.

Childs would be coming down the front stairs but there wasn't time to wait. Swagger made after the running man and almost knocked Cromarty flat as he rounded the corner. Cromarty had heard the commotion and seen the man running into the night with the gun in his hand. He had his own revolver in his hand. Behind him his driver, a young headquarter dick, lit the red spotlight on the police car. Cromarty glowed like the devil. Swagger thought he might have to take a swing at him to keep from getting arrested, to stay on his man.

"Well?" shouted Cromarty. "Come on!" And together the two of them ran after the gunman, the siren on the car swimming after them like the brass section of an orchestra carried on a wave.

Swagger was making better time than Cromarty, but the

## THINGS BREAK

I followed them right to the door. They didn't see me. And when the threadbare old man appeared—the fence, Swagger called him—with his long, thin hair and his elbow patches, and took the three of them inside, I couldn't see them any more either, so I went around the building. I wanted a way to follow this scene that I wanted nothing to do with.

I found a spot where I could see a window lit up on the second floor where \_\_\_\_\_ stood, framed. I felt sick with sadness, like it was already done. The window was open and I could hear some noise, enough to know that Swagger was talking. You could always know Swagger was talking, he always talked. I was outside and \_\_\_\_\_ was inside and I wasn't doing anything to help, and all I knew was that Swagger was talking. Like a child knows what noise a cow makes and what noise a sheep makes, I knew that Mike Swagger was talking, and that he was going to cop \_\_\_\_\_ or kill him and I was going to stand outside while it happened.

Swagger was talking to the old man. The old man didn't seem to like what Swagger was saying to him. Twice \_\_\_\_\_ laughed, once before and once after the shot. The noise from the shot made me feel like I'd been hoisted from my feet by a hook stuck between my shoulder blades, sure. But I did nothing about it. I tried to figure if I could make it up the fire escape to the window, without trying it. I thought about going back around the building, breaking down the door. I thought how I cared more about Evelyn Heydt than I cared about \_\_\_\_\_ and I tried to tell myself that I cared more about Evelyn Heydt than I cared about myself, but it didn't take.

I stood outside alone and thought what a lousy best reason I made for doing nothing to help \_\_\_\_\_, while he was at the window and not laughing any more.

\_\_\_\_\_ had a gun in his hand and had raised it at Swagger or someone else in the room with him. He tried to shoot and his gun did nothing. He came through the window and shots came with him and he must have taken one in the arm because after he'd made it to the ground he ran past me clutching at it, blood in his fingers. I'd put myself in the dark where he wouldn't see me. Swagger didn't see me either. \_\_\_\_\_

made it to the street corner and turned both ways, his head raised like he was sniffing for something. He was listening. In the distance there was the sound of the band organ at the fair. There were the screams of girls going down the double chutes, and screams of girls on the Human Roulette Wheel being thrown off balance and into the arms of their dates. There was the rattle of the rollercoasters. \_\_\_\_\_ listened to the noises and turned toward the fair. Swagger was the first to shoot him.

Swagger bent down to the gunman. He grabbed his jaw and forced it back, keeping it from sagging down to his chest. "Hey," Swagger said. "Don't die while I'm talking to you." The gunman breathed heavily. He was sweating. He tried to spit at Swagger and it rolled into the scar on his chin. His eyes were furnaces of anger. "I said once you'd better hope the police got to you before I did. I got to you first," Swagger said, and ground the knuckles of his first two fingers into the hole in the man's gut, "but not by much." He moved the fingers to the bullet hole from the second shot, higher up, near the heart. "What I did would have killed you, but we would have had hours, the two of us. Like Campbell had hours, when you dipped him into hell inch by inch." He picked the gun from the ground, where it had fallen when the man was shot. He pressed it into the bullet hole. "You were lucky Cromarty was here. You should be grateful for this." The gun's barrel scraped at the splinters of the man's sternum. Swagger took the gun away and wiped his hands clean on his handkerchief. The young policeman was trying to keep a crowd from forming. Couples on their way to the fair stepped around the shot man's feet, kids performed their disgust and delight for each other, shoving and teasing. "Okay," Swagger said, "you can die now," and he walked away.

An ambulance arrived. Cromarty had stayed back, now he pressed Swagger away from the crowd toward a patch of quiet darkness in the alley. "Swagger, there better be a good answer to this question. Who the hell did I just shoot?" he asked. "And why did I shoot him?"

"That," said Swagger, "was the last of the gold mask killers. There's a body in that building there, a fence called Dickie. He killed Dickie. He killed Cansel too, and he

killed Lowden. Maybe he killed Campbell, maybe Cansel did: for my money I think they did it together, and they both enjoyed it. You did him a kindness. I got to say, I didn't know you were such a good shot, Police Commissioner," Swagger grinned.

Cromarty shook his head. "Dammit Swagger, maybe you better start from the beginning. What did you find out about Campbell?"

"Sure," said Swagger, "from the top. Some crooks from out of town wanted to get hold of a young writer. The writer had run up some debt half a continent from here. Then he welshed. Left the debt and his old name, Campbell, behind and came to the city to try and get out from under it. A ghoul called Cansel thought he had a lead on this writer, so he bought the debt cheaply and came after it.

"Except once Cansel got to the city the writer's trail went cold. He couldn't scare Campbell up by himself, so he came to my office with some phoney spin: a death in the family, a small inheritance that he needed to tell the writer about.

"We had a notion something wasn't right with the ghoul but we still went looking, and Childs was tailed. If you want to hold that against me, I wouldn't blame you. I don't plan on forgiving myself for it.

"Childs spoke to the writer, Campbell, or Holcomb, as he was going by here, who seemed surprised to learn he'd had an uncle to lose. He was spooked and got Childs out the door quick. I guess he would have blown town again, taken up a new name and left behind a new string of debts, but before he could Cansel and his friend there got a hold of him, started to put him through the ringer, to get as much of the debt out of him as they could.

"Except this Campbell couldn't pay. What he could do

was tell stories. That was his line of work. He told them a story about a gold mask. This was something special, this mask. A Colombian death mask, and plenty have died over it now.

“Dickie, before our friend there scattered his brains for him, said this mask could have been 1500 years old or it could have been 2000. He couldn’t talk about it without drooling, and thinking about the islands it was going to buy him. Apparently this mask was one of a kind, priceless. And beautiful.

“Campbell told them about the mask, told them he had a line on it, he got them interested. He told them about it so they wouldn’t kill him, but he must have told them too much. He didn’t keep himself vital. They didn’t think they needed him so they fogged him. They twisted his neck. You saw what they did to him.

“Now Campbell’s dead. Cansel probably thinks he’s in the clear with me, but he knows you buzzers will be looking out for him, and he knows he’s conspicuous. People tend to notice Cansel because he reminds them of their nightmares.

“He should blow town, but he can’t bring himself to. He’s on the line, he wants this mask. And he doesn’t think there’s much standing in his way. While Campbell still had neck enough to name names, he pointed Cansel in the direction of a soft touch, a fumbler in antiques, a rich amateur called Lowden.

“First Cansel wants to make sure the writer hasn’t tipped anyone else to the mask. He wants to know if he’s got competition, so he throws a scare into the writer’s frail, then he goes after Lowden.

“Lowden collected trinkets through auctions and museum contacts, and through Dickie, the fence, who would



come to Lowden whenever he had some goods he knew Lowden would be hot for. South American ceramics. Effigies. Gold. And on a couple of occasions Lowden would approach Dickie when there was something he wanted but wasn't allowed. Pieces the owner didn't want to sell, or wanted to sell but at too rich a price even for an heir to a cosmetics fortune.

"Cansel went with his friend to talk Lowden into giving up the mask. It was another talk that got out of hand: Cansel's friend got carried away and, to Cansel's bitter regret, Lowden got dead. That left Cansel with Dickie as his best chance to find the mask and without a friend he could rely on."

"Okay Swagger," said Cromarty. "I follow that, or most of it. It fits with what we've put together. And I can see how the rest of it played out. This friend of Cansel's didn't like rejection and thought he could keep the mask to himself, so he took out Cansel, and then he took out this fence of yours, Dickie. How am I doing so far?"

"You're not too slow once you've hoisted yourself out of that comfy desk chair of yours," said Swagger.

"So?" asked Cromarty, angrily.

"So what?" asked Swagger.

"Dammit Swagger, if all the gold mask killers, if Campbell, Cansel, Lowden and Dickie all died for this gold mask, where is it? Who got it?"

"For a second I thought you'd figured this thing out on your own, Cromarty, but if you need the steer, I'll give it to you. You want to know who got the mask?"

"Dammit Swagger, tell me!"

"There's no mask, Cromarty."

"What?"

“Campbell made it up. He was a writer. He realised he needed to give them something to save his life and he had nothing to give so he told them a story. He made it good enough to stick, too. Cansel bought it, and everywhere he went looking for the mask he convinced someone else, until Lowden bought it, and Dickie, and Cansel’s friend.”

Swagger looked over at the gunman. He was being loaded into the meatwagon. He’d stopped sweating, stopped breathing heavily. “All for a story,” Swagger said. “All for nothing.”

IT MADE A KIND OF SENSE the way Swagger told it. The only facts it didn't fit were the things \_\_\_\_\_ and I had seen and done, and now \_\_\_\_\_ was dead and I was hiding in the shadows eavesdropping on the men who shot him. Shot him while he'd been listening for the fair, for the band organ and the rollercoasters.

I wanted to have my own kind of sense, something that felt good in the hand, but all I had were bits of broken glass. Swagger had killed Holcomb, maybe. Say he'd killed him. He'd killed Holcomb, then we happened to walk up and knock on the door, sent there by Jarecki. Swagger had seen us and he thought we looked good for the frame. He could have the writer's corpse without the investigation if he just shot us then and there. One corpse raises a question—three corpses provide their own answers. He just had to shoot us, then say that we'd killed Holcomb and he'd heroically taken us out. In the course of his peerless investigative work.

He took a plant on us, hid himself in the phone booth and waited with his gun, but when we stuck our heads out into the rain he missed the shot. He ran, figuring he could pin it to us later, but then he had a better idea. Why hang one corpse round our necks when he could hang four?

Swagger and Childs had some bodies they wanted out the picture, so they killed Cansel and Lowden and arranged to have us obligingly walk in, give the nod to a witness or two, leave our prints everywhere important and drift. I got sick of it, bowed out, but they still had \_\_\_\_\_ for the frame, and they gave him a gun, and \_\_\_\_\_ never touched guns so he wouldn't have noticed if the firing pin had been docked, or the cylinder fixed, or if it was light because they just hadn't put any bullets in it.

They walked \_\_\_\_\_ to Dickie's and killed Dickie in front of him. Then \_\_\_\_\_ earned his keep.

And afterwards Swagger took back the gelded gun so none of the police couldn't tumble to it. That was the take and it was all slick enough and all made a kind of sense. Though it tired me out trying to hold it all together. It didn't have reasons, not for Swagger and Childs, but then not for \_\_\_\_\_ and me either. Maybe we'd all just been carried about by the tide, and \_\_\_\_\_ had drowned in it.

The flatfoot left. Swagger was standing by himself, close enough I could have spat on him. He took \_\_\_\_\_'s butterfly knife from his pocket and used it to cut another cigar.

He didn't look at me, but he spoke loud enough to make himself heard. "I don't think I need to smart you up," he said and lighted the cigar. "You're just smart enough to know not to say anything to anyone about anything, aren't you boy? Smart enough to know they wouldn't listen to you if you did. If you could even get it out that gimp mouth of yours." Child's had come from Dickie's. He walked over on his aluminum pole and his rubber hoof. He cradled something in his one arm.

"We don't need to buy you," said Swagger. "We don't need to pot you. You just don't figure." Childs handed him what he was carrying: a package, wrapped up tight like a baby. "And of course you already made your play, didn't you Box? You stood here and you watched. The best that you could do." Swagger ground the rest of his cigar under his heel. "What a swell guy. The writer's twist sure is lucky, having a swell guy like you calling on her." Then he walked away.

## *Muscle*

*The next time he comes Hector tells Box, You thought that you loved my daughter. You never did. You thought, I love her only sometimes I forget it and hit her. But all you ever did with your love was try and get things out of her. You used what you thought was love to keep her to yourself, to make her do what you wanted.*

*My wife, Hector says, this is before we married, I can remember things I used to shout at her when she'd been somewhere without me. I wanted her: wasn't that love?*

*Hector sits without saying anything for a long time, pain peeling from his face like burned skin.*

*It wasn't love, he says. Love is the end of excuses. Love is you don't want things just for you any more. This thing, he waved at the device, this is more of the same mistake. You want something, so you think you can just have it.*

*I sit here, with the man who killed my daughter and my grandson, and I keep thinking how if we had them back you'd do the same thing to them again, and it makes it real again, real as when they showed us what you'd done to them.*

*He wipes at his eyes. He waits until his voice is steady again.*

*If I used to be someone else, he says, it was because of however I was made. Even if I figured out how to be a different person, and I think I have, the part of me that figured it out—that's another part of something I never made. I'm a piece of meat in this skillet, he says tapping his head, or else some God made me some way, and if you're a nasty piece of spoiled meat I guess it wasn't your doing either.*

*The way I used to feel, the nasty, selfish son of a bitch I was, is still a shadow I carry with me. And I bring it here, and it's lost in this nighttime you're carrying with you. And I bet you die in that chair without once in your life ever having seen the day. I should pity you but I can't see past how much I hate you. Too often I can't even see back to the love I had for my daughter for all this hate I have for you.*

*I'm going to keep sitting here in my skillet and thinking how you're stuck in yours until the hate's gone. I'm an old man but I'm going to forgive you before I die.*

*Hector goes back to his reading.*

THE END

SHARK

We are walking through the small island's small patch of rainforest with Peter, our guide.

Louder than the sounds of the other birds and the chirruping cicadas is the Cocrico, an ugly bird, with a body like a pheasant but a blackened, cruel head that looks as if it's been forced into a furnace. It screeches its own name (*KAAWkreeeKO! KAAWkreeeKO!*).

We walk and see processions of leafcutter ants, and dark ridges that bear termites as they travel and feed and return to their nests in the hermetic termite dark. We see a clump of sky and the giant fallen tree that tore it from the canopy. Peter explains the ongoing, months-long sprint of the forest to claim the new sunlight and the rain.

He shows us a bottle-cap circle of dirt, and gets you to tickle the surface with a feather, teasing out the little spring-loaded spider that lives behind it.

He lifts his hands to his mouth and returns birdcalls through the trees, and it brings to us Motmots and a brightly yellow-breasted Trogon.

We are off the coast of the island on a glass-bottomed boat, going out to the coral, where we will put on our fins and our masks and we will snorkel. You have just seen a turtle swimming beneath us, but from where I am sitting and probably slow to react, I have missed it. I look down at nothing but cloudy ocean floor passing below until I get distracted by something and lean back, and immediately you see a shark. You point it out on the laminated illustrated sheet of sea life we have beneath our seats: a nurse shark, short and broad. You show me how its tail switched back and forth with your arms, laughing at the silliness of your own display.

I screw up my nose and think about intrauterine cannibalism. I remember reading this about nurse sharks a long time ago, that several offspring share the mother's womb but only the strongest is born, having devoured its siblings.

We swim and see brain coral – discomfortingly true to its name in domes with labyrinthine grooves – and blue and yellow fish that fluoresce brightly and keep with us as we float along with them in the sway of the water. We see a shoal of silver points like spearheads. We don't see any sharks, and I'm glad that we don't, though I'm not afraid of seeing one.

We are walking along the beach by our hotel, holding hands, carrying our shoes. The sun has been leaving streaks of red and orange, but also greens, a puddle spill of oil across the sky, but now it is almost completely gone. We are jokingly discussing the possibility of spying a leatherback turtle walking out of the sea to lay its eggs before us on the beach. The idea is both completely unserious and actually exciting, even for me, a lot more ambivalent about the pleasures of nature than you.

We turn around and start walking back, moving closer together and further towards the water, until the waves are breaking around our feet. We talk about food, realizing together that we are hungry.

Between us and our hotel, coming along the beach, we see a figure, who I worry might be Roger, a local we met the day before, who might offer to sell us pot again, or want our room number again, or make us stand awkwardly and worry about how we can excuse ourselves while he sings a song again.

As the figure starts jogging towards us, you stop me by the arm and tell me to listen. I wonder if this is some plan to keep Roger from speaking to us, but then I hear it too.

It is coming from out across the water, but whether it is the sound of a boat, or an animal, or even a person, struggling somewhere, I have no idea. 'What is it?' I ask you and you say, 'I don't know.' Roger has reached us and the three of us stand looking out at the water and listening. The noise comes again. It sounds like a moan. Maybe it's a ship's horn, but it's disconcertingly like a voice, or some creature in pain. I want, momentarily, to call back, but feel restrained by your hand in mine, afraid of looking foolish, and I don't. 'Do you hear him?' asks Roger. We ask him what it is and he says, 'You can't hear it? It is telling you "Hello". Listen.' We listen and the next time the moan comes I understand what he means. It is a plaintive, ungainly, hunchbacked noise, but it does sound like 'Aaaaaahh-loooooooooow.'

'He is saying "hello, hello" to Christopher,' Roger says putting an arm across my back and gripping my shoulders with his hands, as we look out into the darkness.

'But what is it making the noise?' you ask.

Roger says, 'He is a shark,' and I laugh and look at him, but his face, still easy to make out even in the low light of dusk, does not betray a joke. I just don't understand, I think. 'What do you mean?' I ask.



## *Shark*

‘The fisherman here,’ he gestures with a hand, ‘have seen him more and more. He keeps his distance and does not bother them, but he is watching them and they say he has started making noises.’

There is another distant sound, lowing at us, almost drowned by the exhausted splashing of the waves on the sand. Roger grins and takes my shoulders again. ‘And now he is saying hello to you Christopher. “Hello! Hello!”’

‘Aaaaaaaaaaaaaahlow,’ moans something in the ocean.

At the hotel desk we ask the bored receptionist if she knows what the moaning noise is, and she tells us that people have been saying it is a shark. Her indifference is so obvious it is almost hostile, and we leave without asking her to book us a table at the restaurant we had picked from our guidebook.



We spend almost the whole day driving along both coasts of the small island, looking out over two oceans at hooked bays with emptily bobbing fishing boats, and at long beaches pocked with tourists baking in the sun. We take the high and sharp turns in the winding roads cautiously and several times we meet communities of dogs sitting, unconcerned, in the middle of the road, and we have to navigate carefully around them. Almost all of the dogs have injuries – twisted legs and terrible limps.

We get lost on the return journey, comically lost in so small a place, with so few opportunities to go wrong, and end up returning to the hotel in darkness only after being helped twice.

We do not go for a walk along the beach, but in our room that night I wake to hear the moan through the French window that looks onto our balcony that looks onto the beach. I gently shake you until you wake and I ask, ‘Is it getting louder?’ and we both lie and listen.

You fall back asleep and I keep listening. ‘Hehloow,’ it says. It sounds better articulated, somehow. Before it was a bovine sound, now the syllables seem more precise, more deliberate.

The next day we go snorkelling in one of the bays towards the north of the island. We do not understand where everyone else is, everywhere we go is quieter than we expect. Where are the throngs of tourists? We are glad they're not here, but it puzzles us that we never see them.

As we swim mask-down in the gently swaying clear water we see more blue fish, and more kinds of coral. There are bushes of white-tipped fire coral that will burn if you touch it. Elsewhere just off the island is coral that has been killed by incautious snorkelers and divers, who have stood on it or selfishly broken off pieces to keep, turning hundreds of years of growth to ruined death. There is something pleasing about the honest, defensive violence of the stinging fire coral.

I begin to think about the nighttime lowing and it ruins some of the serenity of floating in the water, and I fall back, drifting stupidly alongside your fins, and when you kick, water enters my mask. I turn my back and blow air out through my nose to clear it, but my view is clouded in parts. I've turned my back on the direction of our swimming but not lifted my head from the water, and I'm facing out towards blue emptiness, where the coral shelf drops away to darker depths. Through the hazy lens of my mask I think I see a broad, grey figure in the water. I think it is watching me. I think it is wearing spectacles.

But when I try to place it in an unclouded corner of the mask, it is gone.

I am no longer able to enjoy the holiday. The sun is too hot, the beer is too sweet, we have not been able to find any particularly good food and what we find is rarely cheap. But it was fun and relaxing and everything I had wanted until the shark and the calls. You complain that I don't want to do anything now. You're right: I want to get on a plane and get away from here. I don't want to visit forts or museums, I definitely do not want to go near the water, not on this small island, where it is impossible ever to get away from it. The moans have been gradually changing, each loose animal sound resolving itself, being corrected into something else. I lie awake listening at night, my body aching, sore for sleep, as if it is a building that has been expanding and contracting with the seasons while its joints and seams fatigue.

But I still let you take me to beaches and I try to focus on books as we lie on towels, try to appreciate this sunset, try not to let you notice that I keep on the outside

## *Shark*

of you as we walk along the sand, keeping you away from the ocean's edge.

Now the sounds are uncannily like a human greeting and we still have a week – six nights – to go.



The shark – it is definitely a shark – has been seen drinking in the hotel bar. Luckily the bar is for guests only and he is always sent away. But he brings with him pieces of stone he is somehow shaping, and he is managing to make them more and more closely resemble a room key. Soon they will not be able to refuse him.

I won't let you go for breakfast at the hotel. I feign dislike for the crowds, who appear only at mealtimes and then scatter, some falling messily by the pool, the rest just mysteriously gone (do they go back to their rooms? could we stay in our room?). My dislike for the food is genuine, but I elevate it in my complaints to the level of a phobia, I say that I think it has made me sick and I don't want to risk eating it again. You concede, and I buy us armfuls of snacks from the hotel gift shop.

You insist we go out on the birdwatching tour given by our rainforest guide, Peter. It means getting a boat to an even smaller island, which is a wildlife sanctuary. Peter meets us at the hotel and drives us in his car up the coast, telling us that there is one other person going to join us, who we'll meet at the small town that the boat departs from.

On the drive Peter sees a particular kind of parrot moving through the trees and stops the car, taking his binoculars as well as a telescope from his boot to show it to us. I don't want to ruin your mood, so I try to seem as enthusiastic as I can, and join you in peering into the dense green foliage for a green-feathered bird. Peter mimics its call to try and summon it out into the sunlight. It takes a long time, while he becomes increasingly frustrated. You agree with him that the longer we spend waiting and looking the more of a waste of time it will have been if we give up without first getting a good look at the parrot.

Eventually the bird lands in a streak of sunlight on a branch and waits while Peter quickly arranges his telescope. We take turns looking through the eyepiece at it puffing out its magnified chest. I admit to you that it's beautiful, which it actually is. You hook

your little finger into my hand as I peer into the telescope. The bird moves on and we get back into the car.

I begin to enjoy the drive. The scenery looks different as a passenger than it did from behind the wheel; I begin to let myself feel sleepy, leaving the small talk to you, resting the side of my face on the cool window glass, my eyelids heavier and heavier, until we are pulling to a halt at the town where we are hiring a boat, and we pull up alongside the shark, who is waving at us, waiting for us.

I stand away from the shark as we wait for our boat to be pulled into the beach (why is he coming in the boat with us? why does he want to look at birds?). I feel ill whenever I look at the shark.

I find it a little gratifying when Peter discreetly asks the shark for his money up front, whereas we will not pay until the end of the day, but maybe this is just because he is driving us back to our hotel and the shark is only coming across to the island for the bird tour and then back. The shark is wearing spectacles with no lenses that look as though they have been bent into shape from a rusty wire coat hanger.

You say something to the shark about the weather. I can't believe you are speaking to the shark. You end, 'isn't it Chris?' and I have to admit that, yes, the weather is beautiful and not too hot thanks to the breeze, and now I am also speaking to the shark. I feel sick.

The shark's speech has become a lot clearer, although sometimes when he attempts a long word it ends with an ugly hissing gulp and he stutters while he tries to find a way to rephrase his sentence around it. And when you say anything more interesting than some platitude about the weather it is not obvious if he understands.

We take off our shoes and wade through the water to the little boat, climbing three steps up a ladder onto the back. One of the men stands tugging at a rope that keeps the boat in the shallows; the other takes our shoes from us and then offers us a hand from inside as we climb up. He has to bodily heave the shark on board and when he does the shark falls onto the wet wooden boards, flailing for what feels like a long time. You look almost ready to help him up as he struggles. Finally he succeeds in taking his seat. He straightens his crude, crooked glasses and acts as if nothing has happened.

I am aware of the shark trying to make eye contact with me as the boat travels across to the smaller island. I don't look at him. I turn away from the shark, away from

the two small outboard motors and the man with his hand on the rudder, away from Peter and away from you, and out towards the waves we are bouncing over and the tree-covered mound of an island that we are making for.

When we arrive, we climb the island. I walk last up the hill: Peter at the front, the shark and then you in front of me. The shark does not seem interested in what Peter is telling us, but spends all his time looking around, only paying attention to Peter when he feels it is expected of him, when Peter has turned to see if he is understanding. When Peter does this the shark smiles and nods and nods until he turns away again, and then the shark goes back to looking mindlessly around.

At the top of the hill Peter points out a small bird patterned to look like a snake. It is sitting, motionless, its eyes closed, on top of a large stick. It's remarkable that he has spotted it, it's so well hidden – it takes a lot of pointing and describing before any of the rest of us see it as something other than a knot on the piece of wood.

The shark finds something funny about the bird and laughs at it, big gulping laughs, so loud that I'm worried that the bird, which is maybe five feet from the path, will be disturbed. I want to tell the shark to shut up but you are not reacting and Peter is just looking at him in a bemused way so I don't say anything.

We come to a break in the trees at the top of the hill and have a view of the ocean and of the cliff-side of the island, where white birds with red beaks and long white tails almost the length of their bodies spiral and dive above and around the waves.

There are a few large, dark birds of a kind we had seen circling high up earlier in the week, birds with distinctive, sharply pointed, almost pterodactylic wings. Peter tells us that these are frigatebirds.

'They cannot dive for their own fish, these ones,' he says, 'because when they get wet they are unable to fly and will drown. So they wait for one of the white birds to have just swallowed some fish and then attack it.' Peter mimes shaking a bird held in his fist, 'Until it sickens up its catch, "bleh",' he sticks out his tongue for the regurgitation, 'and the pirate takes it.'

The shark laughs his wet, gulping laugh.

The last four days of the holiday I am sullen and wretched. I refuse to do anything near the water. I refuse to plan what we might do at all, out of some inchoate dread that the shark will discover our plans and insinuate himself into them. I refuse to eat at the hotel after we have lunch there and the shark asks if he can sit with us, and we can't, out of politeness, say no (I glare at you as you gesture him into the empty seat, but also think, what could you have done?). I pack our bags as best I can, which causes a long argument when you get irritated that I am putting away things you still intend on using, clothes you still intend on wearing. I find myself provoking arguments a lot. I rent a car for the time we have left without asking you, and insist we drive ourselves everywhere. We see a local delicacy for sale called 'shark bake' – a sandwich of battered shark – and I feel pleased and laugh drily but we don't eat any.

Late one night the hotel phones our room to let us know that there is a turtle nesting on the beach and I lie to you, telling you that the call was a mistake, meant for somebody in another room. And I can't sleep because I know how much you want to see the big leatherback turtles nesting, but I can't stand the idea of going out onto the beach in the dark.

Still, we largely succeed in avoiding the shark for the remainder of the holiday. And on our last day I drive us to the airport four hours early. The desks, as we check in, are covered but open to the heat, without air conditioning or fans, and it is our hottest day on the island, but my whole body is full of relief that feels good, like ice water. I am elated. Because we are so early there is no queue to get through security and we sit in the small departure gate. You are angry that we are wasting our last day sitting in the airport, but my good mood overcomes you too, and we go from passing the time in our books to silly schoolyard games of slapping each other's hands and you showing me how to make a cat's cradle. We joke about having sex in the ladies' and then do sneak into a cubicle and spend five minutes making out until we hear someone else come into the toilets and you go bright red and we both have to struggle to keep from laughing.

On the plane I fall asleep before the safety procedure begins and when I wake again we're in a different climate on another part of the world. People are already standing, either reaching for their overhead luggage or waiting neck-bent for the doors to reopen. I float like a contented cloud through baggage reclaim and immediately fall asleep again once we're on the train.



It was less than two weeks later that the shark moved into the flat downstairs.

I say the thought aloud, 'Less than two weeks later he moved in downstairs.' The words are swilled and slurred, the drinks are swill, our guests 'You guests are swell,' I say to a kind of patter of laughter and I try the other sentence again, 'It was less than two weeks later that he moved into the flat downstairs,' I say and point at the shark in a way that must look accusatory, and the shark mouths 'One week,' for everyone to see and it gets a laugh, though what does it even mean? that I'm lying? and the words swill and swell.



You say we need to take him a present and welcome him, say hello. I want to know why the shark has appeared, what he is doing here. I don't want to acknowledge him, I don't want to speak to him.

I tell you that if we welcome him we are saying that it is okay that he has followed us here. You say that it's a strange coincidence that we have to acknowledge. I tell you that you always think the best of everyone, which you do.

We take the shark a bottle of wine. The shark says what a surprise it is to see us, (on the other side of the world! can you believe!) and that he simply has to cook us dinner. And before you can say anything I tell him that definitely, yes, we should all have dinner together, but unfortunately we are both just so busy at the moment and it might be a month or two before things calm down. The shark makes us take a tour of his flat, and then we excuse ourselves and go back up the stairs.

I ask you if you think there's anything strange about the way he is decorating – the furniture he has chosen and the way he is arranging it – which I think makes it look like he is beginning to match our flat, though he's never seen it. You tell me that there's only so much he can be expected to do, given that our small flats share basically the same layout, and that I need to stop it, he was perfectly nice to us, we just had to say hello, that was all.

I lie to you, telling you that another police notice has appeared on the pavement along my short walk to the bus – one of the yellow metal signs with a time and a date and an appeal for information – and that our landlord has said it is okay for us to fix another lock to our door. And I buy an electric drill and a sturdy-seeming deadbolt, and when it is fixed in place I email our landlord to ask forgiveness, saying it completely escaped my mind to ask for permission in advance.

I try to avoid passing the shark in the hallway, but I still sometimes do, and then I have to speak to him. And sometimes, worse, unbearably worse, we pass each other on the tight stairs, our backs pressed to opposite walls, our stomachs shearing against each other.

You are always quick to tell me that you do not *like* the shark exactly, but you have conversations with him and then tell me about them with obvious empathy. You tell me that the shark is having difficulty fitting in and finding friends and is having troubles at his job (he is a programmer – did he know that I am a programmer too?). I try not to show how much I enjoy hearing that the shark is struggling. One night you tell me that the investment company where he works is doing badly. The company has been going through rounds of layoffs and another 100 people have just been let go.

As I fall asleep I think of a chaotic watery thrashing, dart after dart after dart piercing the shark's hide, and I sleep well.

The shark's company goes out of business. Mine is hiring.

'If I was going to say anything to them at all,' I tell you, 'it would be *not* to interview him, in case he ends up following them home.' You frown at me.

You told me to get him an interview, you look beautiful, 'She always thinks the beautiful best of everyone' I say, and some clapping, and a voice at one of the back tables shouts, 'She'd have to!' and gets a laugh. 'She's always been my conscience,' I say, looking at you, and you're looking back at me, smiling sweetly sadly.

And I couldn't be cold-blooded with him, because then what would that make me?

'And lucky for him, no one else showed up for their interviews,' I say. Laugh, laugh, it's funny, but a lot didn't: no excuses, no phone calls, just didn't appear.



‘And before you could say,’ I say, ‘you could say . . . you could say –’ interview, intervene, intercede, intrauterine interview, ‘before you could say anything, the two of us were working with each other *and* living next door.’ And after that I cycled into work, every day, always.

I sit and I wonder if it would be better to have the shark on my team, working directly beneath me. Knowing that he is around without knowing exactly where he is or what he is doing makes me uncomfortable. I can’t keep my mind on my work or my eyes on my monitor unless the door to the office is closed. I’ve started always eating at my desk.

The shark eats with a large group in the canteen. I hate it that he is well-liked. I hate the fashionable glasses with their tortoiseshell rims that he wears now. I hate his loud, easy laugh.

You answer the knock on the door. It is the shark. He says he has accidentally ordered too much takeaway and asks if we have eaten. Soon you have invited him in, he is eating from our plates, he is holding our cutlery, it is in his wide mouth.

As he eats he tries to work the conversation around to the subject of our journey into work, and I cut him off rudely, or almost rudely, ignoring your glares. The shark has bought a car and would be happy to give me a lift in every day, and back too. I hate cycling and all its life-threatening terrors, and I won’t even let him make his offer. Cycling is the only way that it is absolutely impossible for us to share the trip.

You are saying goodbye and walking him out. You ask him to ours for dinner again the following weekend. He excitedly accepts and we listen to him clumsily descend the stairs.

I whine at you, childishly *whine*, and you tell me that you had to make up for how rude I was being, and I feel ashamed and angry.

I have been going in to work late and leaving late to avoid passing the shark on the stairs or having to take the lift with him at the office. Before that I was going in deliberately early, but then I imagined he was beginning to do the same. Now I imagine that his timing is again creeping towards mine.

While the shark is popular and well-liked I’m beginning to appear stand-offish, with

my solitary lunches at my desk, my closed door and my awkward time-keeping. I never go to drinks with colleagues because I always expect the shark to be there. I no longer have friends at work.

I walk into the kitchen to get a glass of water and it is full of rowdy laughter. A small crowd is being entertained by the shark, who is doing an impression of me. He is making me sound superior and aloof. As the group notices me the laughter dies off and the shark turns around.

I spit out the words 'You've always been a good mimic,' turn and go back to my office. I lock the door and for a while I cry hotly.

At home I can't bring myself to talk to you about it. You tell me that we're going on a picnic with the shark at the weekend.



The floor sways beneath my feet. 'I'm seasick,' I say, 'only it's from alcohol.' And there's laughter, but it's uncertain now – haunted, hung on to by question marks. 'You're like "Ha ha?"', I say, and they are like that. The floor flails beneath my seat. I look at the paper. Don't the bridesmaids look pretty, don't the bridesmaids look lovely. 'Don't the bridesmaids look pretty lovely?'

'Ha ha?'

At the bottom of the piece of paper just before I stood up, I had added the word 'shark', and the letters are crude and blotted and their lines shift on the page like strands of seaweed.

The two young men are pulling the component parts of a desk from their various cardboard boxes. Moving in silent concert and without referring to the instructions, they begin to lay lengths of board together, one holding the pieces in place while the other quickly fixes them with an electric screwdriver. These are the last few minutes that the office will be just mine. The shark stands at the door, grinning over his cup of coffee, waiting.

Three small teams have been restructuring our database and the shark is now in charge of one of them. This puts the shark's job at the same level as mine, though I'm not

involved in the database.

The men lift the computer from the floor onto the new desk and together wire its several parts to each other and to the building's power and network, then quickly test it, gather up the strewn cardboard boxes and styrofoam and leave.

The shark orders sushi to celebrate and we eat facing each other across our desks. A small plastic dish of soy sauce sits halfway between us and when we both reach for it with one of the rolls of seaweed- and rice-wrapped fish, one of us has to wait until the other has used it. I am made to hold my arm stretched out towards the shark, almost touching him.

'My best friend,' I say and I raise my glass, and glasses across the room go up in reply, but I'm not making a toast, so I put the glass down and I upset some flowers – the vase almost tips over, splashing an aunt with water then shuddering back to stillness. I apologise to the aunt, I've upset the aunt. I thank the wet aunt and the dry aunts and the dry uncles and cousins. I lift my glass and empty it in a long gulp.

'My best friend,' I say (because hadn't you pointed out that there was no one I spent more time with? that there was no one I was closer to?), 'and then my office mate.' (The shark standing by the office door, grinning his wide, wide grin; the shark sitting across from me constantly, facing me, constantly; the shark's things, his stationery, his books, his papers, on my desk, itching me.)

The shark's things are encroaching on my desk again. I can't focus while a single pencil, or a piece of paper, or a quarter inch of his monitor stand are across the crack between our desks. It's as if I'm allergic to them and my skin is tautly stretched across the area that belongs to me, that does not belong to the shark, and still there they are, chafing my skin.

The shark has somehow persuaded the leaders of the other two database teams to agree to a new procedure for committing changes. Now, before being committed to the repository all large fixes go through the shark's team.

It would be silly to complain about this new arrangement. To anyone with even a passing understanding of the system it's obvious that the shark's team is not responsible for all the commits. And I don't work on the database, it is none of my business. But

there is a rumour that the shark has been told he is getting another promotion. Do the people who decide promotions and pay raises and office arrangements understand the system?

But there's nothing to complain about, and it's not my place to complain.

'My best friend,' I say, 'and then my office mate, and then my boss. And now my best man.'

There's something about the way I say 'best man' that cuts through the room like the flick of a tail, and it makes your father and one of the dry uncles half-stand and reach toward me, and I take two steps back, away from them, and away from you, and away from the room, and I protectively shield the microphone, which sings plaintive feedback. My legs move slowly, as if I'm dragging them through water, the shark is sitting comfortably, his smile is casual, behind his tortoiseshell glasses his eyes are dark, alert and attentive.

'And now my best man,' I say, and I look at the shark and I can feel my eyes watering and my legs are underwater. And the room with its hundred and more guests, and you, and all the flower arrangements and carefully set tables, and the waitstaff with their hands folded carefully behind their backs and all the faces watching me: like a shoal of silver points we all sway with the enormous movement of the ocean. 'Though he's not much of a man,' I say to the shark, 'you'll never be much of a man.' The water lifts us all and lowers us all back down. In front of me the uncles are restless and you are concerned, behind me the shelf drops away into darkness and hidden currents and lung-crushing depths, and I take a step back and somewhere above I hear my voice stuttering.



We are sitting in the pub, the three of us, drinking pints of lager, surrounded by scattered tennis gear and the debris of a late weekend lunch. It feels like the first time I've been in a pub or out in the sun for a long time, since before planning for the wedding began, and there's still months of planning to come. My arm feels tired and as I lower my pint I absently rub at my bicep. The shark reaches over and squeezes the muscle and laughs

loudly, and I smile a well-practiced smile at him, and I know that a few days before I would have felt exhausted by the touch, by the laugh, I would have felt slung over with a tiredness that might have pulled me down onto the table, and through and down. And I feel some of that tiredness. But now there is a plan and I cling to the thought of the plan and it supports me.

The shark finishes telling a story about his new job, and then, in the lull that follows it, I suggest that we all go on a holiday together to celebrate his most recent promotion. You look surprised, while the shark quickly, greedily agrees. He raises his drink to the idea and the three of us collide our glasses. He asks where we should go, and we all take a moment to think about it. I narrow my eyes thoughtfully for a moment, then say, 'I've got an idea!' You look at me, and your look is suspicious, but I carry on. Because there is a plan, at last there is a plan, and it arrives looking like politeness and generosity and friendship. The details may not be there yet, but the plan is there, and the three of us can all go out together, back to the island and to the sea, and when we come back it can be just us, me and you.

I say we could take a trip back to the island where we all met, and wouldn't that be nice? and wouldn't that bring back memories? And the *weather*, and the *beer*, and the *food* (for a guilty, flashing, fragment of a second: a wooden sign, hand-painted with a price and the words 'shark bake'), and the beautiful *sea*. I say this and smile encouragingly and you look at me curiously, and so does the shark.

And then one of you suggests France, and you talk about it excitedly, making plans, discussing regions and sights and wine.



I resurface, more or less, as you are kissing goodbye to the last of the guests. The shark is sitting with me. I try to remember what I said and then, as I begin to remember, I try not to. When only the staff are left, you come and sit with me and the shark. I cry in dry heaving gulps. Together you bring me water and comfort me.

# THE BRAIN DRAWING THE BULLET

‘The Brain Drawing the Bullet’ is a digital short story. To read it, please visit:

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